

Tight budget requires tough calls

MY TURN

By MAYOR ROXANN WEDEGARTNER

There's an amusing irony to the timing of Ann Valentine's column regarding the city's 2024 operating budget ["Mayor's budget undermines schools," Recorder, April 13]. In an executive session of the School Committee, less than 12 hours before reading her **My Turn**, I voted favorably on all of the settled contracts available to the School Committee. Unfortunately, I had to be at a Ways & Means meeting where the FY24 budget was being presented to the committee and could not stay for the scheduled School Committee meeting.

I have always had respect for Ms. Valentine as a teacher and know that she cares deeply about her profession, her students, and her colleagues. I harbor no animosity toward her heartfelt disappointment and frustration. Welcome to **my** world.

I fully understand and empathize with the disappointment among members of the public, the school administration and staff, and the School Committee about having to make cuts to the school budget. I lived through six school budgets from 1992 to 1998 as a School Committee member and chairwoman at a time when getting an intact, fully funded budget through the Board of Selectmen and the Town Council was nearly impossible, and often ended in deep cuts and layoffs. And in the last three years, I've experienced having to create budgets as a mayor and School Committee member during a time of uncertain funding. The Greenfield Public School system does not exist in a silo; its funding is part of an overall budget that under Massachusetts General Law we are legally obligated to balance and that cannot exceed the levy ceiling without an override. It bears repeating that we are not a wealthy community, but we want to do right by all of our city departments.

Unfortunately, for FY24, the revenues and state aid for the city and the schools, at this point in time, do not support a robust, fully funded budget. Many other departments within the city also experienced cuts in the budget that affected staffing, the ability to create new programs, or meet expectations for existing programs.

Before presenting the budget to the community and City Council, a reduction of \$2,743,003 in the overall budget was made by the Finance Director and myself, working in collaboration with our department heads who were affected. There's nothing enjoyable about doing that. While the schools received a \$1.5 million reduction, a staggering number for sure, it remains true that \$21.6 million of that budget is funded.

Additionally, at the April 19 City Council meeting, councilors will vote on two financial orders totaling \$581,850, over a half-million dollars, that I put forward to assist the School Department in paying for the recently settled contracts.

Lest anyone is uncertain about whether or not the city funds its schools, remember that the school budget is made up of direct appropriation to the schools (approximately 37% of the overall budget) and indirect appropriations paid by the city and not part of the schools operating budget (health insurance, liability insurance, debt for school capital expenses, etc.). When you factor in the indirect costs of an additional \$14.4 million, the schools' percentage of the overall budget is well over 50%.

The idea of calling a budget document a moral document, as Valentine has, may sound virtuous and honorable, but to me it sounds self-righteous and filled with picking winners and losers, especially when it's applied to one part of the document over others. It doesn't solve the question of how to equitably apply moral decision-making to very tangible issues which have far-reaching effects.

Is it moral to fund the Greenfield School Department at the expense of the Greenfield Department of Public Works that plows the streets and school driveways so that students and parents can travel safely to school? Is it moral to fund the Greenfield School Department at the expense of the Greenfield Police Department, who show up at our schools when called in an emergency in order to ensure the safety of staff and students, something they've been doing a lot of lately despite reduced staffing? Is it moral to fund the Greenfield School Department

at the expense of the Greenfield Fire Department, whose ambulance and firefighting services ensure the safety of the staff and students?

The point is we're all in this funding dilemma together. Our fight should not be with each other, but rather with our state legislators and governor. Let's work together to lobby them for changes in the funding formulas in order to ensure our fair share of state school funding that support all areas of our school budget.

***Roxann Wedegartner** is the mayor of Greenfield.*

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