

May 19, 2008

Re: Open Letter to Lincoln Taxpayers and Parents regarding the Financial Town Meeting and 2008-2009 School Department Budget.

Dear Taxpayer/Parent,

Unfortunately, at this year's Financial Town Meeting (FTM) we witnessed a concerted effort by union leaders, political candidates, and some elected officials, to impose a needless half-million dollar tax increase onto our property taxes. Prior to the FTM, false and inflammatory information was purposely circulated to incite both parents and teachers to support this needless increase. More shameful was the immature behavior that took place among those individuals celebrating the imposition of this unnecessary burden on the Lincoln Taxpayers.

As a parent of two young children and two older children that attended our public schools, I can say without hesitation that our teachers do an outstanding job! As your Town Administrator I can say unequivocally that I support the Lincoln School Department. I also have a duty to all Lincoln taxpayers to advocate for responsible, effective, and efficient services, and limit spending to what taxpayers can afford.

Likewise, our elected School Committee members are also committed to public service, outstanding members of our community, and friends to many of us. I understand that the Committee has a primary duty to advocate for a quality education for our children. However, that duty does not end there. They also have a duty to efficiently manage school spending, negotiate contracts with the employee unions, and advocate for the taxpayers that elect them.

Our Budget Board members are also dedicated to public service. They are an elected, non-political group that volunteer endless unpaid hours of their time to recommend a responsible budget for the town and schools. The board is made up of Lincoln residents just like you and me; they are parents, financial professionals, community planners, friends, taxpayers, and teachers.

To exemplify the Town of Lincoln's support for our schools; over the last decade taxpayers have provided annual increases averaging in double digits to support our schools. This support has continued despite a decade of reduced State Aid to Education from approximately 30% of our school budget to the current meager 15%, a decade of declining student enrollment, a decade of increased staffing, a decade of spiraling health insurance cost, and a 62% increase in the pension cost just since 2005.

To illustrate the continued support of town government for schools, we have provided additional local revenue of \$345,500.00 over the past two years to replace cuts in State School Aid. In the 2007 fiscal year, we added an additional \$799,000.00 to school capital accounts for continued renovations at Lonsdale School and fire code upgrades. In this fiscal year we are proposing adding \$450,000.00 of restricted capital to fund a building for the Literacy Center, renovate the ELC at Northern Elementary, and resurface tennis courts at the High School.

Beginning three years ago the Rhode Island General Assembly instituted State Law S3050 as a mandate to reduce local municipal and school spending. Then, as the State's fiscal deficit intensified over the past two years Lincoln experienced additional State School Aid cuts of \$345,500.00, with further State cuts anticipated this coming fiscal year. If that were not enough, the region is experiencing a significant economic recession which has reduced Lincoln's local revenue growth to almost zero.

The Budget Board's recommended budget at this year's FTM provided conservative, but adequate, funding for all current school programs, activities, and teacher's compensation. Only administrative functions were identified in the coming year for reductions by the board. It must be noted that during the budget process of the past two years few solutions have been put forth by the School Committee to evaluate programs, reduce administrative cost, or control personnel spending. Instead the Budget Board has only received proposals to add staff and increase spending.

While State Law allows the School Committee to determine how to spend this half-million dollar increase, I hope you will join me in publicly challenging that this added revenue not be used to negotiate personnel contracts, but be set aside to protect local taxpayers from again having to make up additional cuts in State School Aid, or additional shortfalls in local revenue, both of which will most likely occur in the coming school year.

Proponents of this unnecessary property tax increase have claimed that our schools make the community strong, while adding to the value of our homes. While this statement is partially true, it is often cited in a misleading self-interested context. Correctly stated, it is the community that created our good schools, and in reality, it is because of taxpayer support, good planning, zoning, responsible business growth, and stable property taxes that we enjoy good schools in our community.

I believe we have a very competent School Superintendent in Georgia Fortunato and will continue supporting her leadership of our schools. We must all work together to demand the State enact a fair and equitable school funding formula for the Town of Lincoln. We must provide straightforward information to parents, teachers, and taxpayers if we are to implement responsible solutions. I would be happy to meet with any concerned group to share available information.

There are still many difficult challenges ahead. We must become more innovative if we are to preserve our excellent schools. If we fail, the only people to lose will be the taxpayers, teachers, and most importantly our children. If we can not take responsible steps to maintain stable property taxes and address the unsustainable cost of education at the local level, our children that we educate today, will not be able to afford our community tomorrow.

Sincerely

T. Joseph Almond,
Town Administrator