



Date: May 4, 2009

RE: Letter to the Editor: Taxpayers must reclaim FTM

This year I encourage all registered Lincoln voters to attend the May 11th Financial Town Meeting (FTM) and invoke your right to determine how local government manages and spends your tax dollars. Voters at this year's FTM will be asked to approve a proposed budget of almost \$70 million dollars for municipal and the school department expenses.

Why is your attendance essential? The local FTM represents one of the truest forms of the democratic process, especially when special interest and taxpayers alike are proportionately represented to allow for fair and objective debate of good public policy. Regretfully, Financial Town Meetings throughout our state have fallen victim to apathy, with an average attendance of only 2%-3% of eligible voters.

What is happening in our community? While our overall fiscal health remains strong, the current economic crisis gripping our state and nation has resulted in several millions of dollars in lost state aid and local revenue for the Town of Lincoln. In turn, our ability to sustain funding for municipal and school expenses has been dramatically diminished. We have had to make difficult, but responsible decisions to maintain our long-term fiscal health, sustain our well established surplus reserves, preserve our excellent bond ratings, and protect our property taxpayers.

What steps have we taken? In February we were required to cut the current Municipal Operating Budget by almost \$1 million dollars in response to lost state and local revenues. All non-essential spending was frozen, staffing levels were reduced, and capital expenditures were eliminated. The proposed July 1, 2009 budget again requires that we reduce spending to offset an expected \$2 million in lost revenue. As a result, proposed municipal operating expenses have been reduced from the previous year, and all municipal employees have agreed to a wage freeze for the coming fiscal year.

What are we proposing for our schools? We have proposed, as required by state law to provide the same level of funding as in the current school year. However, our lawful obligation to level fund requires us to repeat the unnecessary addition of \$517,000.00 to the school budget. In effect, this will provide an additional \$1,034,000.00 over the current year expenses. After careful review the Budget Board put forth a proposed school

department budget that would adequately preserve all the educational programs currently in place.

The Budget Board further rejected request to add funding for wage increases and proposed a budget that requires that all school employees accept a wage freeze equal to that accepted by all municipal employees. Without this concession, employee compensation and benefits would require an increase of \$910,005.65 on July 1, 2009 and an additional \$840,988.52 on July 1, 2010, resulting in a significant impact on local property taxes.

What should parents know? As a parent myself, I can assure you that I support maintaining the best school system that taxpayers can afford. I support and respect the many excellent educators in our school system. However, in deliberating a proposed budget, we must not to allow our children's programs, extra-circular activities, and sports to be held hostage in an effort to protect wage demands during the most difficult economic challenges our community has faced in decades.

Local taxpayers, many of whom are, or have been parents of school aged children, have generously increased their share of local school funding over the past eight years in excess of \$21 million dollars, an increase of 77.82% while State Aid to Education for our schools has only increased by \$978,716 or 15.23% during the same period. In contrast, average student enrollment in our schools has declined, yet; overall staffing and related expenses appear to have increased significantly during this same eight year period.

What solutions can voters and parents demand? First and foremost, Lincoln's voters must take charge of their fiscal wellbeing and attend the Financial Town Meeting. It is essential that we send a clear message that holds all our elected and appointed officials accountable to responsibly address the reality of reduced and/or limited funding in the coming years.

Active participation in the deliberation and outcome of the proposed budget will further hold our elected officials accountable to engage in a public exchange of honest and straightforward information with the parents, teachers, students, residents, and taxpayers they serve to identify meaningful solutions, plan a responsible course of action, and implement necessary changes to ensure the successful future of our schools and town services.

Lincoln residents, students, and taxpayers have benefited from decades of sound fiscal management. Again, I strongly encourage all registered voters to attend the May 11th Financial Town Meeting and preserve the outstanding fiscal health of our great community. I would also invite all voters and residents to visit the town website at www.lincolnri.org to view the proposed FY 2009-2010 budget.

T. Joseph Almond
Town Administrator