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Council finds \$750K for schools; More money could come if city turns down police contracts

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The Gloucester school system is edging away from its "worst case" toward its "best hope" funding plan but still faces significant teacher and staff layoffs even with an extra \$750,000 the City Council's Budget and Finance Committee has advised should be spent on education.

Another \$600,000 is up for grabs. It is enough to pay for the School Committee's so-called "Plan B" working budget but is ticketed by Mayor John Bell for police union contract raises.

The deadline to set the city's budget for next fiscal year is June 30 at midnight.

Funding question: contracts or schools?

The Budget and Finance Committee on Thursday night finished what Council President James Destino termed an agonizing "40 days, 40 nights" trudge through the mayor's proposed \$78.5 million spending plan.

Steven Magoon, Bell's budget director, characterized the effort as an equal sharing of too little, but Councilor Jason Grow characterized Bell's budget as a cookie-cutter concoction absent of apparent concern for the schools' downward spiral.

By the finish, all the committee could find for redirection to the schools was less than \$500,000, taken in mostly small chunks, up to 2 percent, from city departments. Only three jobs - all highway workers - were defunded.

But with Grow agitating for another culling of Bell's budget, this time for city jobs, and the school advocacy group One Gloucester pleading for parity between the city services and schools, Destino grudgingly agreed to back a \$250,000 charge against the stabilization fund to help the schools.

He said, "In good conscience, I can't start lopping heads off," then blunted Grow's final request for another \$50,000 from the stabilization fund for education with a warning that "we'll have a tough time getting this through the full council as it is."

Even iffier is the disposition of \$170,000 Bell has sought to pay for raises in the new contract for the 13-member Police Superior Officers Association.

A special council meeting is scheduled for next Wednesday, the day after the council takes up the committee's municipal budget recommendations. On Tuesday, councilors refused to pay for the raises.

Thursday brought two developments that destabilized the settlement.

First, in a written opinion, city attorney Linda Lowe validated the council's right to force the mayor back into negotiations with unions by withholding the money needed for raises.

Then, firefighters union president Clinton Carroll told councilors his rank-and-file would make a financial concession won in collective bargaining last year to help keep stations opened. Chief Barry McKay estimated the union was giving back as much as \$250,000.

Destino said as much as \$600,000 is needed to backfill both the superior officers' and patrolmen's contracts. Should the council refuse to approve the police contract raises, that money could be appropriated elsewhere, including from the schools.

"I'll make that motion," Destino said.

Whether it passes is another matter. Although the council last Tuesday voted 8-1 against funding the contract and directed Bell to reopen negotiations with the police unions, Councilor Michael McLeod, a retired career police officer and a rival of Destino's in the race for mayor, said he supported the police raises.

Councilor Bruce Tobey warned Tuesday that such an initiative - to take from the police to give to the schools - could send a "third rail" charge through the city. To avoid it, he urged the police unions to give some money back.

Magoon said the mayor will push for the money for the police raises.

Schools need help

The council budget committee's aim from the start was to do what it could to get the School Committee the \$35.4 million it sought for an orderly transition away from using Fuller as an elementary school. With Plan B funding, the School Committee projected losing 32 teachers and staff.

The budget Bell sent the council was \$1 million short. The School Committee and One Gloucester argued the difference meant shedding an additional 12 teachers and staff.

Destino described himself as conflicted at the end of the committee's largely unproductive search in Bell's budget for significant sums that could be redistributed to the schools.

"Is there anything left to cut on the city side?" said fire Chief McKay. "If not, move on."

Grow and Destino had different answers.

"We have not made systematic cuts in personnel," Grow said. "We cut three jobs in the DPW, and we're losing 44 in schools."

Destino rejected additional personnel cuts.

"Where do you take it from?" he asked. "You can't close fire stations, lay off policemen, can't cut assessors ... of information systems, you can't cut revenue-generating departments."

But Leslie Sarofeen, One Gloucester's budget monitor, argued that the schools were "at a nadir point" after five years of retrenchment in which more than 50 teachers and staff were lost.

Destino argued that tapping the \$1.5 million stabilization fund would be counterproductive with Moody's ready to re-evaluate Gloucester's bond rating and the city facing huge borrowing needs. The lower the city's bond rating the more interest it must pay when borrowing

But One Gloucester President Mark Nestor countered that failing to shore up the schools would encourage an even faster exodus of students to Gloucester's suburbs and increase the "school choice" charges that are already more than \$1 million and stigmatize Gloucester as a place for settlers and investors to avoid. "School choice" allows students to attend schools in other districts, with their home district paying the bill.

"I don't know what to do ... let's do this," said Destino, who offered the motion to deduct \$250,000 from stabilization, package it with the \$476,000, culled from Bell's departments, and make an effort to dislodge the police contract funding.

He also said he intended to revive Grow's ill-fated effort last month to pull retired teachers out of a state health insurance program that required 90 percent municipal funding. Grow estimated the shift could save the city close to \$500,000 a year.