
losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/04 21:17

Dear Readers,

I lost my temper at this Thursday's School Committee meeting. There's nothing that makes my blood boil faster than when politics overrides common sense. Before I explain, I'd like to publicly thank Michelle Nadeau for getting up during the public comment period to ask the School Committee if they had received a report of the Town's current financials from the Town Manager.

The handful of voters that actually attended town meeting will recall that the Town Manager convinced Ted Tripp to withdraw his warrant article requiring budget forecasts by explaining that he and Lynn Savage, the Town Accountant, would provide ongoing financial updates.

That was May. This is now October. No reports of actuals vs. budgeted items in either revenue or expenses have been provided to anyone. I have attended Fincom meetings this summer and into the fall. No reports were provided. At the last Fincom meeting, the Fincom asked Mark Rees when they will receive them and he promised they would receive the reports this Thursday, October 9th.

What upset me at the School Committee meeting? I started to hear a response that indicated that they would need to wait for the Revenue and Fixed Cost Committee's annual report, due before the snow flies. This is unacceptable.

We implemented a new municipal budgeting software program two years ago that was heralded as a wonderful tool because we could generate up-to-date and accurate financial reports on any given day. Where are those reports from either Lynn Savage (town accountant) showing the current state of municipal finances, or from Steve Furtado (schools' business manager) showing the current state of school department finances?

I want the Finance Committee to have the spine to demand a report from both sides of the municipal budget immediately, this Thursday, that shows the actuals for FY 08, the actuals vs. budget for the first quarter of FY 09, and I want them to get a straight answer from Mark Rees, the Town Manager, about what our Free Cash from FY08 is that will be available to either supplement revenues or deposit into reserves. I want the Fincom to refuse to accept the annual excuse that the town accountant can't answer questions before the state has certified the free cash number. A reasonable estimate can be provided if the Town Manager has the will to provide it.

Why am I still burning about this two days later? Because I have spent ten years attending meetings and watching the ridiculous annual political dance between the town manager/BOS and the School Superintendent/School Committee. Every year I have watched the school department's administrative team labor uselessly for weeks if not months, putting together a budget with absolutely no clue from the Town Manager what number they should shoot for, to try to reconcile school needs with the monies actually available. And on the other side of the ledger, I have watched municipal dept. heads labor over budgets when they know it's a waste of time, because their requests will be shot down anyway.

This year, since Town Meeting, I have heard one person – School Committee member Chris Nobile – ask several times since August to get the boards to sit down and reconcile the differences between the Town Manager's five-year forecast and the Finance Committee's forecast. He's been ignored.

The Finance Committee's forecast predicted significant budget deficits from one to seven million over the next five years. The Town Manager's forecast, while casting an initial brighter future, still showed deficits over one million in future years. The Town Manager's numbers were tied to several optimistic factors, like state aid, growth in revenue and reducing health benefits costs by joining the GIC. Guess what? Growth? What growth? State Aid – we'll be lucky if they come through with their promises. Joining the GIC? – nope; we missed the October 1st deadline. We'll keep hoping for next year. Watch the video of the open meeting discussing the differences between the two forecasts - it's posted on this website. Very enlightening when you think about the current realities...

The financial picture is swiftly spiraling downward on a daily basis. Both forecasts assumed we had avoided layoffs and setbacks for FY09. For those of you who attended the NAU/LWV's Municipal Forum this week, you heard some pretty dire possibilities for the remainder of this year – our FY09 state local aid is at risk. If our state aid doesn't come through...we may see significant cuts in services and/or layoffs before we even get to Town Meeting this May...

And what happens if Ballot Question 1 to repeal the State income tax passes on November 4th? Do you, North Andover's Voters, feel that you know enough about our town's current financial condition to even assess what the consequences are? How comfortable are you casting a vote over something you know nothing about? Would you buy a car if you had no clue what was in either your wallet or in your savings?

Doug Swatski, as Chair of the Finance Committee, I am asking that you and your committee immediately demand a current accounting of North Andover's FY08 actuals, and FY09 actuals year to date vs. budget numbers, along with a

reasonable verbal estimate of the Free Cash. Post this info on the Town's Website. This is valuable information and these are public documents.

Do it Now – voters need to understand our finances BEFORE they head for the poles on November 4th.

To have any board member of either the Finance Committee, Board of Selectmen, or School Committee, or Town Administrators like the Town Manager, Town Accountant or Schools' Superintendent or Business Manager stonewall on this is unacceptable and inexcusable.

You all need to do the jobs we elected you, appointed you and paid you to do.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed, Pres.
North Andover United, Inc.

=====

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/05 14:30

A point of clarification - Chris Nobile is the one elected official calling for a "budget summit" to look closer at the two forecasts. One citizen - Cindy Jalbert - got up at a Board of Selectmen meeting over the summer and requested that the two forecasts be looked at and updated to find a united forecast. She was ignored as well.

Ignorance can certainly be blissful at times, but this time it's dangerous to the well-being and future of our town. --Sandy

=====

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Dawn Crescitelli - 2008/10/05 23:58

Sandy,

ignoring the requests of citizens is a tool employed by the SC. I would suggest you and Michelle stay on the SC to make them follow through. Ask every meeting during public comment. Elected officials Ignoring the citizens they are supposed to serve is an inexcusable travesty that has been tolerated for far too long in this town. Back door deals have become the accepted norm. Business needs to be done in public. We the citizens need to be heard and answered.

=====

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Phil DeCologero - 2008/10/06 14:00

Sandy,

The disconnect is frustrating, and unfortunately government can be incredibly inefficient - this being a perfect example. However, I know that Tracy Watson, and I believe also Rick Nardella have asked for actual vs. budget numbers, broken down monthly, from the Town Manager. If I am not mistaken, I believe they are already getting these reports - so I do think our Board of Selectmen are paying attention to our budget.

As a side note they also formed an audit committee to oversee the annual audits so as to ensure that all departments are tightening up their procedures and saving money in every place they can.

=====

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/06 14:22

Hi Phil - I congratulate Rick Nardella in pushing for the audit committee to be formed, but a committee that ensures that accounting procedures are implemented is very different from a public examination of the FY08 actuals, and first quarter

FY09 actuals vs. budget. Citizens need to know where we stand NOW: are our revenues on target? are our expenses on course? The NAU/League of Women Voter's Municipal Forum last Wednesday night was a real eye opener - there's a real chance that North Andover will not receive its full local aid for this year, let alone next year. It is irresponsible if North Andover's leadership allows its voters to go to the polls on November 4th without an up-to-date understanding of our current financial picture. Property values are down, the economy stinks, we did not join the state insurance pool (GIC), we do not have union contracts in place, and we will be asked at the polls to consider eliminating 70% of our local aid. What are the potential risks/consequences? Nobody has a clue right now because the Town Manager, Board of Selectmen, Finance Committee, School Committee, Town Accountant, Superintendent, and Schools Business Manager have not provided us with that info. Where is it?

Here's a golden opportunity for our leaders to show united leadership. Put the financials on the table for us to see. Now. Not during FY2010 budget deliberations. That's too late.

--Sandy Gleed

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Phil DeCologero - 2008/10/06 15:34

It is irresponsible if North Andover's leadership allows its voters to go to the polls on November 4th without an up-to-date understanding of our current financial picture.

Citizens do need to know about our town's current financial situation.

However, citizens do not need this information in order to make informed choices on election day (or, at least, not on an Election Day in November)

North Andover receives aid from the State of Massachusetts. Knowing only this should be enough to make any voter an opponent of Question 1 - a measure that would eliminate 40% of our State's revenue.

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/06 19:01

We do need to know where we stand before November 4th. First, Voters need to know what is already at risk, even if Ballot Question 1 didn't exist. Then we all need to look at the current risks as compounded by the potential repeal of state income taxes. What services are we willing to give up? How deeply are we willing to sacrifice to gain what amounts to an average of \$800 in our pockets, not the \$3,600 bandied about by proponents of the repeal? --Sandy

To vote ignorant of the facts is unacceptable. --Sandy

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/13 22:02

A quick update - I attended the Finance Committee meeting this past Thursday. Town Manager Mark Rees did not attend. The Town Accountant did. The financials requested by the fincom - and promised to Ted Tripp at town meeting - were not provided. Furthermore, the accountant told the fincom that when she and the town manager are able to provide those financials, they will only supply information that is 60 days in arrears..."stale info" per one Fincom member's comment.

The accountant promised to post what she could on the town's website in the coming week.

The truth is, the fincom will have no opportunity to review our current financial status prior to voters going to the polls to decide to eliminate state income tax.

Which town board or employee will have the guts to speak publicly, before November 4th, to tell voters which services are at risk now because of (a) the economy spiraling downward, (b) potential state cuts in local aid for the current fiscal

year, FY09, regardless of the election and (b) what services are at further risk if our local aid is cut 71.1% due to repeal of the income tax?

At least five of our elected and/or appointed town leaders support repealing the income tax . I'd like to hear what their backup plan is to provide local services for our citizens.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Bill Kelly - 2008/10/13 22:20

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Bill Kelly - 2008/10/13 22:42

Sandy,
I second your call for immediate information from the supporters of question 1 in the event it passes on their plan to maintain services.

Bill

Re:losing my patience re town finances

Posted by Sandy Gleed - 2008/10/15 15:56

According to the School Committee agenda released today for tomorrow's meeting, Thursday October 16th, 7:00 pm at the Town Hall, Town Manager Mark Rees will report to the committee on the FY09 budget (current budget) and the outlook for FY10.

It's about time.

I won't be at the School Committee meeting because I'll be in Andover at the League of Women Voters' Ballot Question Forum. I'll watch the School Committee meeting afterwards .

I'm hoping citizens care enough to attend this meeting.

I'm hoping the Town Manager, Dr. Marini and the School Committee members freely discuss which specific educational services are at risk, both because of the downward spiraling economy and especially if voters repeal the state income tax on November 4th.

The Town Manager needs to have this same discussion with the Board of Selectmen on October 20th. What services on the municipal side are at risk?

I'm hoping citizen attendees require specific answers and information from the Town Manager and the School Superintendent and School Committee. Please don't settle for vague answers or stale information. You deserve better.

This ought to be a beneficial, proactive discussion if handled well. By the way, Governor Patrick has scheduled a press conference this evening (Wednesday) at 5:00 to talk about budget cuts. Until the legislature grants him 9C rights to cut into local aid, he can't. But the consensus is that the revenue figures are bad enough that the legislature will only be able to hold out against that until the end of December.

Sincerely,
Sandy Gleed

-
- North Andover School Committee
Meeting Agenda
Date: October 16, 2008
Time: 6:30 p.m. Executive Session/7:00 p.m. Regular Session
Location: Town Hall
1. Call to Order
 2. Executive Session 6:30 PM
 3. Reconvene & Pledge of Allegiance 7:00 PM
 4. Public Comment
 5. Chairman's Report
 - Town Manager to Discuss FY09 Budget & Outlook for FY10 Budget
 6. Recognition
 - Merit Scholars
 7. Superintendent's Report
 8. Unfinished Business
 - a) Corrective Action Plan for Coordinated Program Review – 2nd Reading
 - b) FY09 Monthly Update & First Quarter report: Food Services
 - c) Appointment to Town's Audit Committee
 - d) Accept Gift from Franklin School PTO
 - e) Hall of Fame – Call for Candidates
 9. New Business
 - a) Approval of Overnight Fieldtrips – NAHS
 - b) Presentation by Community Programs – FY09 Programs
 - c) Approval of Technology Plan
 10. Other Business
 - a) Approval of Minutes
 11. Subcommittee Reports
 - a) Personnel
 - b) School Committee Policies
 - c) Athletics
 - d) Curriculum
 - e) Superintendent Search
 12. Other Reports
 - a) School Building Committee
 13. Executive Session
- =====