

## SOME FACTS ABOUT WESTON

### Special to the Crier by THE WESTON FINANCE COMMITTEE

Weston is currently determining its next budget, which will be voted at the May Town Meeting and go into effect this summer for Fiscal Year 2021. The budget in turn determines how much you will pay in taxes. Currently the budget is expected to increase by 5.4%. This is an increase of \$4.5 million, to get us to roughly \$89 million, or \$99.3 million including debt service. These numbers are based on both the School Budget as proposed by School Administration on January 13 and the Town Budget as proposed by Town Manager Leon Gaumond on January 21.

The Finance Committee would like to give you some facts about our town to consider as we enter this budget season. Many of the following facts are taken from the Finance Committee Report that was included with the warrant book you received prior to Town Meeting last May. For more detailed information, that report can be found at <https://www.weston.org/DocumentCenter/View/18620/Report-of-the-Finance-Committee-PDF>. Some additional facts appear in this year's school budget book, which is also publicly available online.

Some facts about our Town:

- Weston currently has the highest average single family tax bill in the state. Our average tax bill was \$19,653 in FY18, which was 34% higher than the \$14,613 average of next 8 towns, which are comparable towns to ours. Those towns are Lincoln, Sherborn, Wellesley, Carlisle, Dover, Concord, Lexington, and Wayland. Even Lincoln, which is next highest on the list, was considerably lower, at \$15,629.
- Over the last 10 years, the typical (median) Weston household has experienced a 37% increase in its property tax bill or 3.2% per year. Boston area inflation has averaged 1.8% per year over that period.
- Over 10% of our budget goes to pay for debt on money we have borrowed for projects or capital expenses (debt service). The amount of money we owe for this debt is more than a year's worth of our operating budget, \$93.5 million as of 6/30/19.
- We also have significant unfunded liabilities for employee pension (\$61.4 million) and employee health benefits (\$66.5 million), as of 6/30/19. All told, our current debt and unfunded liabilities total \$221.4 million, or \$58,838 per household. For perspective, this figure is approximately 2.4 times the average level per household in our comparable towns.
- Roughly two-thirds of our total town budget (including benefits) goes for expenses for our schools, though less than a third of households have student(s) in the Weston Public Schools.

Some facts about our Schools:

- We have much higher per pupil expenditures than those of neighboring comparable school districts, despite performance metrics which are not materially different. Our cost per pupil is 25% higher than the average of comparable towns/districts. Our per pupil expense in FY17 was

\$24,226 compared to an average of \$19,334 for Dover-Sherborn, Concord-Carlisle, Wellesley, Lincoln-Sudbury, Wayland, and Lexington. In particular, the Dover-Sherborn combined district, which has about the same number of students as Weston, is only at \$20,595.

- Enrollment has declined in our schools and is projected to decline more in the future, as the population of school age children in Weston has been declining. We had 2,365 children in our schools 10 years ago (FY11), 2,181 children 5 years ago (FY16), and are projected to have 2,005 children in our schools next year. This is a decrease of 15% over the past 10 years.
- Enrollment at our high school has dropped 44 students since last year and is projected to drop another 14 students next year. Enrollment at WHS was 748 students ten years ago, and is projected to be 649 next year. Currently 35 classes at WHS have fewer than 15 students enrolled, which is below class size policy.
- Not long ago we had classes coming through WHS that were large enough to justify 10 sections when they were in elementary school. Recent classes entering the Weston schools have been much smaller, typically having 7 sections. Next year's kindergarten class is expected to have 6 sections. We may at some point get an increase in students due to 40B's, but no large ones have been approved and ground has not yet been broken on anything, so it will be some years before we see any effect on our school enrollment.
- Weston Public School budgets have continued to increase significantly even as enrollment has dropped. The costs attributable to education in the overall budget (School budget, Benefits, and Gross debt service) have grown from \$52.3 million in FY15 to \$58.7 million in FY20.
- Staffing has continued to grow in our schools, even as enrollment has declined. Ten years ago, we had staffing in our schools of 428.4 FTE (Full Time Equivalents,) with 2,365 students. Next year, even with the reductions in staff of 13.6 FTE's that are proposed in the school budget, we will still have more faculty/staff than ten years ago with a substantially smaller enrollment. Next year's proposed budget includes 434.8 FTE's for an enrollment of 2,005 students.
- The vast majority of our school expenses are people. Of the total school budget of \$42.9 million, 85% (\$36.5 million) is salary and other cash compensation to faculty and staff. It is important to note that healthcare and other benefits are a significant additional cost item that is not part of the school budget.

Weston has a longstanding tradition of supporting excellence in public education, and our schools are among the most highly rated in the Boston area. While we must strive to maintain the excellence of our schools, there are certainly opportunities to provide services more efficiently, particularly with the declining enrollment in our schools, and it is important that we do so. Likewise, we need to look for opportunities to keep our town (non-school) expenses from expanding as well. The excellence of our schools is important for the benefit of our children and for our real estate values, but the escalating tax burden could very well have the opposite effect on the attractiveness of our town and consequently our real estate values.