

The School Improvement Council met in the Media Center on Thursday, February 12 at 8:00 a.m. Attending were: principal Francine Goldstein, teachers Stephanie Mamakos and Nancy Sweeney, community representative Tom Boutureira and parent members Annie Gilbert, Susan Greenberg, Julie Howe and Dorie Resnik.

Mrs. Goldstein had arranged for a guest speaker, retiring School Committee member Tony James, to brief us on the outlook for the FY 2009-10 school budget. He described the situation as “dire,” pointing to a \$3.2 million gap between a level services budget and the funds allotted by the town manager. Of that, James said, the district will save about \$750,000 by increasing various fees-for high school athletics and bus service, among other things-but the vast majority of the difference will need to come from personnel cuts, meaning as many as 55 positions could be lost.

But there is still a chance that outside aid will arrive in time to help close the gap, James said. One “ray of hope” is the just-passed \$787 billion federal stimulus plan, which includes significant spending on education that should go directly to local school districts. Another is the Massachusetts governor’s budget, which features provisions for raising the state hotel/motel tax, allowing a local option for increasing meal taxes, and closing the loophole that allows telecomm companies to avoid paying property tax. If all that passes, Andover could see \$1 million more in state money, of which 65 percent would go to the schools.

James also discussed other possible ways to address the budget gap, including going to the unions to discuss a salary freeze and drawing money from Andover’s stabilization fund. He told us Town Meeting has been pushed back to May to allow for sufficient time to explore all the possibilities and determine the outcome of the pending federal and state legislation. He answered all our questions with candor and clarity, readily sharing his insight and breadth of knowledge to give us a real sense of the challenges that lie ahead.

The next SIC meeting will take place March 5 at 8:00 a.m.

--Susan Greenberg