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Towns > Stafford

## Stafford budget rejected, setting stage for staff, program cuts

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STAFFORD — Voters on Wednesday rejected the proposed \$36.5 million budget for 2010-11, and town officials say further cuts will likely mean positions and programs will get the ax.

About 15 percent of the town's voters turned out to reject the budget by a 110-vote margin, 592- 482.

A town meeting will be held at 7 p.m. Wednesday, June 2, at Town Hall, where the hours of the next referendum will be set. The Board of Selectmen will recommend a June 9 referendum running from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. Wednesday's referendum ran from noon to 8 p.m.

After the results were read at the Stafford Public Library, Board of Finance Chairman Edward Muska and other town officials drove back to Town Hall to consider the next step.

In a meeting convened in the Veterans Meeting Room about 15 minutes after the polls closed, the Finance Board voted to cut \$150,000 from the budget proposal and to take \$50,000 from the cash fund balance. Muska said the cut would mean a 2.8 percent tax increase, or about a 0.75 mill increase in the tax rate. The budget proposal rejected by voters called for a 1 mill increase.

The Board of Education would have \$100,000 cut from its budget, while the remaining \$50,000 would be cut from the selectmen's budget.

School Superintendent Therese Fishman said the spending cuts mean that positions and programs would probably have to be cut. She said the school board could look at cutting sports programs, though she said those cuts likely wouldn't yield enough savings.

Fishman said she will prepare her recommendations over the next several days and present them to the school board at its meeting on Monday.

First Selectman Michael Krol said the town would have to cut services to trim the government budget sufficiently.

"We've already cut more than we wanted to cut, so now we're going to have to cut something that's really going to hurt and people out there are going to see it," Krol said. "Something's not going to get done."

The selectmen will vote on cuts to their budget at the board's May 26 meeting.

Muska said the light turnout may have been a factor.

He said that "592 is not a lot of 'no' votes. A lot of people who should have come out because they have a stake in it have not voted."

Krol agreed.

"We were about 700 or 800 short on this one," Krol said. "People stayed home, and so the 'no'

votes will always come out.”

The rejected budget for the 2010-11 fiscal year would have been a \$400,000, 1.1 percent increase over this year’s spending plan. The tax rate would have increased to 28.21 mills, a 3.7 percent increase.

Spending on education would have increased \$440,000 to \$24.93 million, a 1.8 percent increase. The selectmen’s budget was to have increased by 3.41 percent to \$7.89 million.

Stafford voters passed the budget the first time out from 2007 to 2009. In 2006, voters rejected four budgets before finally approving a spending plan on the fifth try in mid-September.

Turnout at last year’s referendum was about 20 percent. In the five years before 2009, turnout reached that level only after the budget was voted down on the first attempt. More residents voted Thursday than in 2007 and 2008.

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