

Ashland

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"Gateway to the North Maine Woods"

An Open Letter to Ashland Citizens:

The Ashland Town Council's sub-committee for Education is working with the MSAD #32 School Board and Administration to determine how future school finances and the Municipality's tax share can be best managed given the financial pressures for both entities due to declining enrollments, reduced town valuations, and external issues regarding the local economy, employers, and municipal needs and issues.

The most recent school budget hearing in May resulted in the 2016-2017 budget passing yet there are challenges that must be addressed that will impact the future viability and continued school operations at the level the 2016-budget and beyond will support. In a recent open letter to the Town Council and Citizens of Ashland, Mr. Joel Hall, School Principal, fittingly described the need of "balancing fiscal responsibility with providing the best possible education for our students with the resources available" and the need for "continued communication and collaborative problem solving efforts".

In order to accomplish all the above, it is important that all citizens understand the fiscal facts impacting our tax base. From 2009 to 2015, the Town of Ashland has seen increases of 6.9% in Municipal taxes, 7% for County taxes, and 98% in the Education Budget (an 11 Mil increase in 6 years). It is notable that while fiscal constraints and enrollment losses have caused the elimination of several school programs, the school continues to provide exceptional educational programs and cultural opportunities to our community. However, moving forward, the pressures of declining enrollments, school staff salaries and benefits increases, and administration costs are likely not sustainable at current rates unless certain changes, such as increased student enrollments, reverses its downward trend. Secondly, external factors, such as the proposed National Park in the Baxter area, will create problems for the forest products industry, of which our area depends heavily upon. A third area that could be beneficial but may be several years out is the Bald Mountain mining opportunity. The Oxbow pullout from the district is the next hurdle that will negatively impact the school budget. Given both positive and negative pressures from all the above, it is clear that the community must come to grips with the financial pressures facing all citizens.

The current level of foreclosures, tax acquired properties, and unpaid taxes from citizens who cannot pay their property taxes all contribute to the increased financial pressures the municipality has to juggle in order to maintain current services and support the education budget. The current mill rate of 27.5 is unsustainable for local residents and businesses and Ashland will be hard pressed to keep some of our current residents and businesses, let alone attract new ones. Without a strong community based effort to address all these issues, Ashland will be pressed to request financial relief from the District School Board in future budgets. Future budgets cannot be sustained without changes in state funding (net increases in student enrollments), and/or cost reductions in the school budget.

The Town Education committee is working to address all of these issues, and plans to work closely with the town council, community businesses, the school board and administration, and the other district communities, to identify and address all issues and potential solutions to ensure continued success of our MSAD in giving our students the best education possible, and being fiscally prudent in developing what is practical given the Ashland tax base. This letter is our "call to action" for all citizens to be involved and part of the dialogue as we grapple with keeping our community intact going into the future. Without a strong community based effort to address all the issues, Ashland will be pressed to seek a reduction in future school budgets, a scenario that will divide this community for years to come.

-The Education Sub-Committee, Town of Ashland

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