## How Does a Town Tyngsborough Examines Path to the Future



## **Sustain Itself?**

By Karyn Puleo

he town of Tyngsborough is, like many others, on a precipice. For several years, budget cuts have been the cause of stress throughout the system. From the schools to the Council on Aging, from the Police Department to town offices, no line item in the town's \$32 million budget has been spared review and, often, cutbacks at yearly budget meetings between the School Committee, the Finance Committee, and the Board of Selectmen. Things were looking so grim in October that the new superintendent of schools made personnel cuts during the school yearsomething that is almost unheard of.

Recognizing that the town and schools are operating in a non-sustainable mode, the Board of Selectmen earlier this fiscal year decided to do something about the budget before the town was pushed off the precipice. The town formed a Strategic Financial Planning Committee, made up of two members each from the School Committee, Finance Committee and Board of Selectmen plus a citizen who has no political association. [The committee also receives input from the town administrator and schools superintendent.]

The committee's mission is to assess the town and School Department's current operations, policies, procedures, organizational structures, resources and services and make recommendations to the Board of Selectmen and the School Committee on essential needs and alternative ways the departments can enhance efficiencies and customer services. As a cohesive team, the School Committee, Finance Committee and Board of Selectmen all agreed that every line item and operation was "on the table," and politics and special interests are to be left behind when the Strategic Financial Planning Committee meets.

The committee got to work immediately, interviewing department heads, reviewing contracts (including those with unions), examining health benefits and the retirement system, and analyzing capital needs and debt service. The residents of the town will be asked for their opinions via a Web-based survey and/or public meetings. The list of activities is exhaustive and continues to expand.

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To date, the committee has interviewed all department heads and the elected chairs of each department. Each person interviewed was provided a prepared list of questions beforehand, requesting honest and open input. Questions ranged from an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the department to an analysis of the department's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Best management practices were noted, as well as any opportunities to centralize, regionalize or outsource work or programs to save money or improve efficiency. Each interviewee was given ample time to elaborate on their written answers. The interviews have provided a wealth of information about town operations.

## **Operating Expenses**

As a mid-sized town with its own K-12 school system, Tyngsborough has become a very expensive operation to run. The school operating budget alone is \$16.6 million, with an additional \$3 million for benefits such as health insurance and retirement funding and other expenses directly attributable to the schools. The School Department, which educates 2.200 children, receives no state reimbursement for transportation and the town must also provide support to the Greater Lowell Vocational School and the Innovative Academy Charter School, both located in Tyngsborough. Parents have come to expect door-to-door busing and moderate class sizes-and they loudly voice their opposition to any changes in services. In the last few years, however, the School Committee has found it necessary to cut sports program funding in order to support general education. This decision requires significant funding by parents for school sports, with no family cap. Additionally, students who drive to school are charged ...>

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\$180 a year to park, and students in grades 7-12 are charged a busing fee of \$200 a year. Even with these fees, significant cuts to operational services have been made.

The town's twenty-five-member police force, at a cost of just over \$2.4 million including the cost of dispatchers, keeps the peace and patrols a town of 3,500 residences-a town divided by a river and sandwiched between two busy cities: Nashua, N.H., and Lowell. Fires are fought by dedicated call firefighters and four full-time officers, but there are only seventeen weekends a year with firefighter coverage at the stations. (Total cost to Tyngsborough taxpayers for fire protection: less than \$600,000 per year.) One hundred miles of town roads are maintained by nine men, with assistance in the winter from plowing contractors. The town's soccer fields and schools must be maintained to the level necessary to play in the leagues the town joins. Residents expect trash pickup at the curb, regardless of the amount of trash they put out or how much they recycle. The town has recently entered a regional agreement for solid waste disposal, which is expected to result in savings of approximately \$100,000 over five years.

The senior center offers daily activities to seniors, and the library provides vital media services to residents, including books, music and movies. The recreation department coordinates the scheduling of all town fields and provides cultural services that no other department does.

All these items come with a cost. And these costs continue to rise. Health insurance, which now costs \$2.9 million a

> year, rose 10 percent in fiscal 2009. Contractual salary obligations for town and school employees increased by more

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than \$1 million this year. Retirement costs increased by more than 11 percent. And the capital needs of aging buildings boost the town's operating costs even more. Suddenly regionalization, centralization and outsourcing are emerging as the only options for maintaining crucial services.

## **Changes Ahead**

Residents have rejected the last few Proposition 2½ overrides put before them. One of these was for both the town and schools, the other for just the schools. Taxpayers are clearly saying that they will pay no more. The alternative, however, may well include a pay-as-youthrow fee for trash, longer times on the bus for schoolchildren, and regionalized police, fire, school or other services the town can no longer afford on its own—and a resulting loss of autonomy that residents and town officials have become used to.

The Strategic Financial Planning Committee is now focusing on defining core versus non-core services. Services mandated by state or federal government or town bylaws are considered core services. The committee is also looking into the reach of certain mandates. For example, a service may be mandated, but the town may be allowed latitude as to the breadth of the service. It's clear that the town is currently providing services that are not mandated, such as curbside trash pickup, but residents have come to expect these services. In the coming months, the committee will be making a determination of which core services must be maintained and making recommendations to the Finance Committee, School Committee and Board of Selectmen based on its findings.

While the Strategic Financial Planning Committee is still doing its work, it's looking more likely that the old ways of doing business are no longer sustainable. The town can no longer afford to provide the services residents have come to expect for the taxes they pay. The committee began its work before the current recession and before state leaders started re-examining the fiscal 2009 state budget—and issuing warnings for fiscal 2010. It is only a matter of time before state and local cuts become deeper.

The Strategic Financial Planning Committee is trying to continue its threeyear focus, but now has been forced to focus on 2010. The committee is using the information it has gathered to assist in identifying core services, prioritizing needs, and identifying possible revenue sources—such as a local meals tax, which Tyngsborough will join the MMA and other communities in petitioning the state Legislature to allow.

Tyngsborough must be proactive and look internally to see what must be done to ensure the financial stability of the town. The town will need to change current business practices, look to neighboring towns to regionalize services, and examine which services are required versus those that have been provided.

Most of all, the town must look at how it can provide sustainable, quality services to residents. Quality customer service is the first priority. The question remains: At what price?