



Portsmouth Concerned

NEWSLETTER

“Information is the currency of
Democracy”

Editor: Joe Robicheau

February 1, 2005
Volume I, Edition 1

From the President (*Larry Fitzmorris*) Welcome to the first edition of the PCC's newsletter! This is a good time to tell you what we intend to achieve with this effort.

Through this newsletter the PCC hopes to communicate more effectively with members who do not have e-mail. At present, we operate our organization primarily via e-mail and clearly leave out a good number of our members.

Some members have suggested to me that we develop a method of communicating with the general membership. With this newsletter we hope to both increase participation of many of those who do not receive e-mail and keep all PCC members informed of our initiatives. Through our newsletter we also intend to identify and discuss the principal issues effecting our town. We hope that this effort will provide an increased level of information on local government for all Portsmouth residents.

On behalf of all members I would like to extend thanks and appreciation to Joe Robicheau who has taken on the duties of Editor of our newsletter. This is a major task and Joe's contribution is going to be both extensive and critical to our goals.

I would like to invite all members who are interested in writing for our newsletter to submit your ideas. To do so, you may contact Joe Robicheau or any other member of the Executive Committee.

PCC Establishes Annual Dues

(*Larry Fitzmorris*) At our December 9 member's meeting the PCC approved a plan to begin charging dues. The intent of this decision is to provide income to support the PCC Newsletter, which we intend to publish roughly each quarter. The publishing date will be tailored to Portsmouth's political calendar.

This is the first time that our organization has considered membership dues, which now will be collected annually. In the very near future you should be receiving a letter to remind you that the dues are payable in January, but I would like to ask all members that have not paid their dues to please do so directly. If you chose to pay dues at the family

rate please indicate the members of your family that are included.

Individual annual dues: \$20.00

Family annual dues: \$25.00

Please make your checks payable to "**Portsmouth Concerned Citizens,**" and send to the following address.

**Portsmouth Concerned Citizens
50 Kristen Ct.
Portsmouth, RI 02871**

The Teacher's Contract

Editor's Note: Jerry Cook wrote a commentary that appeared on the editorial page of the Providence Journal. His comments were read statewide and the members of the PCC have received a good number of positive remarks. Jerry also wrote a shorter version for the Newport Daily News, which appeared as a guest editorial. Jerry's Newport Daily News remarks are provided below for those that might have missed them.

(*Jerry Cook*) Overspending is the real issue with the school budget in Portsmouth - higher than normal salary and benefit increases for teachers and administrators overseen by elected officials who can legally have an affiliation with the same union with whom they are bargaining. Given that profound errors have been made in recent administrative negotiations, it is important to recognize that the size and scope of the NEA contract on the overall town budget warrants due consideration of the following issues.

All NEA and other labor contracts are negotiated in secret. Public scrutiny, a keystone of the democratic process, is non-existent in Portsmouth. Even proponents of more school spending are uninformed as to these matters. Until public oversight becomes a reality, budgets will continue to escalate.

Information contained herein was obtained from two town documents: 'Portsmouth School Department, 2004-2005 Budget' and 'Contractual Agreement between NEA Portsmouth and Portsmouth School Committee 2001-2004* (*Optional Year 2004-2005)' dated 26 June, 2001. This

agreement seems to imply that the NEA is running our school system instead of the School Committee – the School Committee cannot change the insurance carrier without the written approval of the NEA! We have a union/government school system instead of a public school system.

Look at the teacher's health benefit cost to the taxpayers. The benefit package consists of Blue Cross & Blue Shield of Rhode Island Classic Coverage, HealthMate, Coast to Coast, BlueChip and Delta Dental with individual or family plans. Portsmouth school employees co-pay their health insurance somewhere between 6 to 7% of the total cost. In the corporate world the co-pay averages between 33 1/3 to 50%. Therefore, most taxpayers are paying upwards to 50% of their medical coverage AND close to 93% of the coverage for the School Department employees. Other benefits are also provided.

The employee benefits budget for 2004/5 increased 14.5% (\$702,983) to \$5,549,576. Included in this category are payroll taxes, retirement benefits, health, life, workers compensation, unemployment insurance and course reimbursement expenses. Some of which are mandated.

What to do? Most businesses put a cap on the amount of health insurance coverage provided to employees and any increases beyond that amount are the responsibility of the employee. Also Portsmouth pays employees for not electing coverage - \$1,000 family and \$500 for single coverage.

As for salary increases, the basic scale for Portsmouth teachers consists of 10 steps each increased 3.5% for each of the first three years of the current contract and 3.85% for the current year (2004/5). A teacher at Step 1 for year 2003/4 will go to Step 2 for year 2004/5 for an increase of 12.47%. A teacher going from Step 9 for year 2003/4 to Step 10 for the current year, reaps a whopping 23.97% increase. Step increases (2-9) average 9.64% increase.

The agreement also limits the teacher's workday to 6.5 hours for 180 days. Let's recalculate teacher salaries for a few Steps as if they worked 250 days/yr. A Step 1 teacher earning \$32,988 (180 days) would be earning \$45,817 for 250 days of work. A Step 5 from \$42,268 to \$58,706, and a Step 10 teacher from \$62,361 to \$86,612 annually.

There are other add-ons to the basic salary depending on educational qualifications ranging from \$1,175 to 4,150 annually; longevity of 20, 25 and 30 years ranging from \$900 to \$1100 annually; and for national certification an additional \$4,300. Teachers also are paid \$28/hour for attendance at compensated meetings and extracurricular activities.

All teachers receive their salary increases and add-ons regardless of ability or performance. Applying merit increases to teachers, similar to the corporate world, through an annual review process using student performance as a significant element of the review would provide financial rewards to the best teachers while weeding out the underperformers.

Let's not forget the students. They have been ripped-off by the greed of the teachers union to the point that budget

limitations come out of student programs rather than higher than normal salary and benefit increases; a totally unfair and intolerable situation. The blame lies directly with our elected officials – your school committee. Do not allow them to remain a rubber stamp for the NEA. Communities throughout the state are starting to feel the impact of watchdog organizations such as the Portsmouth Concerned Citizens, Little Compton Taxpayers Association and the RI Shoreline Coalition. These watchdog organizations are just beginning and will continue to have an impact on local and state government.

Gym Bond Passes - But

(Larry Fitzmorris) Prior to the election last November the PCC conducted a special membership meeting to hear the design proposal from the members of the Gym Project Subcommittee. Immediately following their presentation the PCC membership voted to support the bond proposal. We clearly took a chance, but a majority of the members believed that the time had come to try to build the gym we thought we needed. We actively supported the proposal in the press.

The bond proposal passed with a 60% majority vote and about 5,000 votes in support. As we all know that was not the end of the story.

During the December 14 School Committee meeting the majority of the committee members voted to issue a Request for Proposal from contractors to build an entirely different gym. We in the PCC suspected this attempt would be made and rallied our members to attend. Mr. Duncan Ingraham led this effort to switch designs and was supported by Terri Cortvriend, Terry Kavanagh and Sylvia Wedge. The proposal was approved in defiance of a very large number of Portsmouth citizens in attendance. Mr. Ingraham's design was for a facility that was substantially larger than the plan approved by the voters, and was essentially the plan rejected in 2003, with the locker rooms removed. At that meeting, the committee also began a process that removed responsibility for the detailed design and construction phases from the Gym Project Subcommittee and transferred it to the Buildings and Grounds subcommittee.

Following the decisions of the School Committee the PCC decided to oppose this effort to the maximum extent possible. We submitted a formal letter to the newspapers and wrote a detailed letter to each member of the Council. We supported Karen Gleason, Gene Love and Brad Sirois in their campaign to raise a petition and a request to appear before the Council. Mr. Love and those who collected petitions were very successful, submitting 1333 signatures to the Council requesting that the gym approved by the people be constructed as presented in the election. The Council declined to take direct control of the construction process, but did draft a letter to the School Committee expressing their concern about the change in design and directing that the project be executed as approved by Portsmouth voters.

The following day the School Committee met and reversed its decision to build the 'Duncan Dome' by a unanimous vote.

Terry Kavanagh chairs the Buildings and Grounds (B&G) subcommittee, with Karen Gleason and Terri Cortvriend assigned as members. This subcommittee was placed in charge of design and construction because of a lack of ability among the members of the Gym Project Committee, but the current members are less knowledgeable than the members of the previous committee, excepting Mrs. Gleason. The (B&G) subcommittee has drafted a Request for Proposal for architectural services that allow for dismissal of the architect for construction oversight upon completion of the final design and the hiring a Clerk of the Works to manage construction. This, the PCC opposes as it reduces the level of professional oversight of the project at a critical juncture.

There is still no identified date for the start of construction and there remains within the committee a desire to expand the design. The School Committee chairman, however, has limited design expansion to a growth of no more than 3%. There remains among the PCC members familiar with this project, a strong concern about cost overruns in a project we believe would have proven to be financially challenging as originally designed.

Separation of Powers Amendment Passes

(Larry Fitzmorris) Rhode Island voters approved the Separation of Powers Amendment to the Rhode Island Constitution in November. This constitutional amendment will be the most important change in state government since the Door Rebellion of 1843. We are already seeing the effects of the constitutional change as the Governor nominates replacements to the many state boards and commissions to replace departing legislators.

The PCC has been a voting member of the SOP Coalition for approximately two years and was pleased to have been a part of this important development in our state. We actively campaigned locally for the passage of the SOP amendment. The level of support for the amendment in Portsmouth increased to 84% from 76% in the 2002 election.

This change will provide, for the first time, a true balance between the three branches of our state government. Until the adoption of the amendment, Rhode Island was the only state in our country that did not have a government balanced between the Executive, Legislative and Judicial branches. The balance of power approach, adopted by the founding fathers in the U.S. Constitution, is the American method of ensuring that no one faction can dominate the government. While Rhode Island has three branches of government,

political power is presently concentrated in the legislature. This amendment will transfer to the governor the executive power of appointment and management of the state's many administrative boards and commissions. It also bans members of the Assembly from membership in those boards and commissions.

Currently, members of the Assembly appoint members, sit as members and, in theory, conduct oversight on 75 boards with a wide range of executive powers. This is a fundamental conflict of interest, in that the legislature is exercising the power to spend tax dollars, hire personnel, make and enforce rules, issue licenses, charge fees, and sign contracts. The transition to a balanced form of government is going to gradually change all of this over the next two years.

In my view, this concentration of power has been the cause of much of the breakdown in political ethics in our state government.

The people of Portsmouth will benefit from Separation of Powers through improved performance of our state government, and its boards and commissions. We will also benefit from the elimination of the many conflicts of interest that are endemic in our present form of government. While this amendment will not turn sinners into saints, it will remove many of the opportunities for corruption and restore the Assembly to its true legislative and oversight role. The governor will administer the executive branch and the legislature will oversee its operation.

This great transition will be a long process, and is currently being opposed by the leadership in both the House and Senate, but this change is inevitable. The people of Rhode Island have spoken.

Upcoming Events

- The PCC is updating our member's e-mail addresses. If you have a new address or have recently established a new on-line service, you may e-mail your new address to LJFITZ45@aol.com or call Larry Fitzmorris at 683-6127
- Our membership meetings take place on the first Tuesday of each month, except January. We usually meet at the Anthony House across from the Town Hall and next to the School Headquarters. We meet at 7:00 PM and all members are always welcome.
- Portsmouth Forum. The PCC is considering holding a forum on the funding of our school system. Although this event is still in the planning stages we intend to hold it before the Town's budget process begins in the Spring.



Portsmouth Concerned Citizens
50 Kristen Ct.
Portsmouth, Rhode Island 02871

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50 Kristen Ct.
Portsmouth, RI 02871