

July 11, 2007

Correcting the record on county budget

To the Editor:

Recent news articles and editorials about the Sullivan County budget process have been incorrect in several areas. As a member of the Executive Finance Committee, I would like to correct the record.

First, the county budget was not delayed because committee members failed to meet often enough or failed to have a quorum present. This statement was made several times at the county convention and is still appearing in print. To date, I have attended numerous budget hearings, the commissioner's budget presentation, and, as of today, 10 finance committee meetings. Other members of the finance committee have been equally diligent in their duty to the county taxpayers. No meeting was ever cancelled because a quorum was not present.

Second, one reason the county budget was not ready for approval was because the commissioners made large changes in the budget at the last minute. No specific details were provided to guide us in making proper appropriations. These details were handed to me on a piece of scratch paper halfway through the county convention. Unlike others, I do not believe the bottom line is all that matters. It is this attitude that I believe has caused a great deal of trouble with the county finances.

Third, and most important, the 2008 budget is based on the 2007 budget, a budget that appears to have failed. This became clear when, as a member of the finance committee, I was asked to approve a \$2 million line of credit for county operations in the middle of April, two and a half months before the end of the fiscal year. I do not take lightly putting my name on such a document! Several of us requested a simple cash flow statement from April 16 to June 30 to try to understand how much of the line of credit might be needed and why it was needed. No useful information was obtained until near the end of June. At about the same time, a request for \$500,000 more was made and granted.

Because many of us on the finance committee do not want to recreate this situation, we have continued to wrestle with the budget. Because we have been stonewalled in so many of our efforts to obtain the information needed to understand the true fiscal condition of the county, we do not yet understand how the cash flow crisis emerged or how it will end. One example is the difficulty obtaining a document that showed Genesis was paid for two administrators at the same time over a period of three months. The budget line for administration was clearly overspent but was not

apparent since further payments were not made for six months and thus did not appear in financial statements given to delegates each month. It is this type of unwillingness to be open with finances, which has made many of us on the finance committee pursue details that others call micro-managing. I call it paying attention to our obligation to be sure county money is properly spent.

The county convention on July 13 has the ability to modify further the budget we will present. It is my hope that a long-term plan emerges for paying back this year's \$2.5 million line of credit and that next April (or March) does not present the finance committee once again with a request for more emergency borrowing.

Rep. Suzanne H. Gottling
Sunapee