Celebrating Martin Luther King Jr.

MARCHERS IN A Peace Walk, organized by Middlebury College, above, proceed up Main Street to Mead Chapel for a vigil on Saturday, Viva Prashad, director of International Studies at Trinity College, below, gives the keynote address in Mead Chapel during Middlebury College’s Martin Luther King Jr. Remembrance and Reflection ceremony Monday night. Gov. Jim Douglas, bottom, also spoke at the annual event.

By ANDY KIRKADY

ADDISON — The Addison Central School board on Thursday, Jan. 17, adopted a proposed budget for the 2008-2009 school year that would raise spending by about 3.8 percent to roughly $18.12 million.

Addison residents will deliver their verdict on that spending plan, which calls for an increase of almost $66,000, on March 4, Town Meeting Day. Last year residents backed a 4.4 percent increase in ACS spending, 202-122.

Addison Northwest Supervisory Union business manager Donna Corcoran said there are no new programs or positions in the budget, and that the board was able to save substantial money by cutting special education positions.

"They were able to keep it as low as they did because there were some reductions in special education staff," she said.

Also, unlike other ANwSU and county schools' budgets, proposed ACS spending was not hit hard by heating costs. Corcoran said the board bumped up the line item for heating oil a year ago, and no further hike was needed this time around. Health insurance increases were also modest, at less than 4% overall.

But the board did face some challenges, including a series of unanticipated problems that will leave an estimated $75,000 deficit entering the next school year. Maintenance was an issue: The school roof needed patching, its driveway needed a culvert, and a series of minor issues in the building required extra custodial attention.

Fuel prices did contribute to the deficit, because gasoline to keep buses running cost more than anticipated this year, adding $9,500 of extra expense.

"Most of the things that created the deficit were unforeseen circumstances," Corcoran said.

She said the school also could not find a speech pathologist to hire, and the board had to contract those services, a more expensive option that added $29,000 to the bottom line. The board also added that amount to next year's budget, believing the school will have to go that route again.

Like other ANwSU schools, ACS is also facing a higher assessment — $38,000 — from the central office to pay for its share of literacy specialists, a site-based clinician, the district's technology coordinator, and the union's summer school program.

All of these programs — which Corcoran said are critical in helping schools meet federal No Child Left Behind requirements — are federally supported, but federal funds for each are dropping on an annual basis, leaving schools and property taxpayers to pick up more of the tab, she said.

"Every year as the federal money has declined, we've had to pick up more locally," Corcoran said.

The extra costs this year will by 2009 almost certainly push Addison into the double budget vote created by a school funding law passed last winter.

Corcoran said the ACS board would have to cut more than $112,000 from current levels to avoid the double vote, which occurs when a proposed school budget exceeds the state average per-pupil spending.

Schools that do so will be required, starting next year, to forward two numbers to voters: one to equal what spending would be if it equaled the state per-pupil average, and a second figure for the amount proposed in excess of that average.

Corcoran said it would be unrealistic to cut that much from the ACS budget, and that she expects Addison residents to see a double budget vote in 2009.
Sweet harmony

FRANÇOISE CLEMMONS AND the Middlebury College Spiritual Choir raise their voices to the rafters of Mead Chapel Monday night during a celebration of the life of Martin Luther King Jr.

Independent photo/Trent Campbell