

Deep divisions evident at city budget hearing

By George Moore 4-15-10
Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN — Speakers at Wednesday's budget hearing were split between those calling for adequate school funding and those requesting an affordable tax rate. The City Council now faces the difficult task of balancing those interests as it sets a final budget in the next few weeks.

Sixteen people called on the City Council to increase education funding, citing concerns that City Manager Lawrence J. Kendzior's proposal would lead to unworkable class sizes. Kendzior proposes no increase in funding for the school system, while the Board of Education requested a 2.3 percent increase.

School officials estimate that about 55 teacher positions would be eliminated under Kendzior's plan, while 22 would be cut under the school board's request. School officials say there would be 30 to 35 teacher layoffs under Kendzior's plan and an increase in class sizes.

"It's important to our children's education not to have large classes," parent Donna Ryan told the council Wednesday.

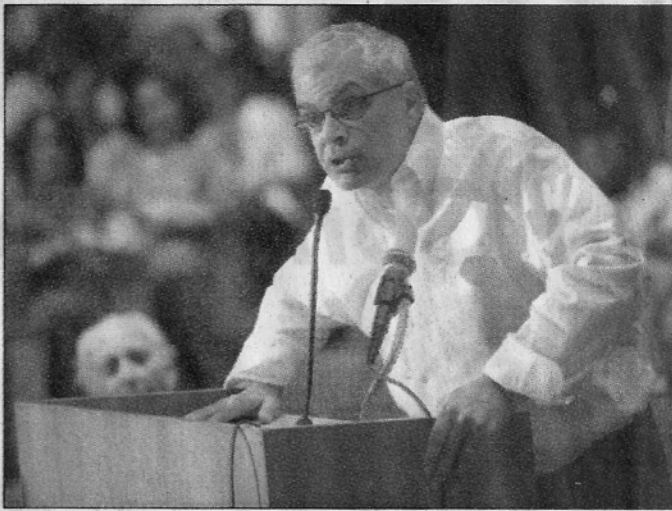
School advocates said proper school funding is important for the city as a whole and for keeping up property values.

"In order to keep this city competitive with other towns, we need to have a school system that people will send their kids to," said Berthinia McClendon, one of several Meriden teachers who spoke in favor of increasing school funding.

Parent Diane Warner-Canova said the council and the Board of Education should collaborate to find areas of cost reduction while providing a quality education for Meriden students.

About six of Wednesday's speakers pressed the council to do what it can to control property taxes. Even Kendzior's spending plan would raise the outer district tax rate by 2.36 percent — to 29.53 mills. Adding education funding without providing cuts elsewhere would increase that further.

Resident Hollis Redding said the \$3,500 in taxes she pays on her 720-square-foot home is already too much. Additional tax increases create a financial crunch, especially



Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

Nick Macri, a teacher at Casimir Pulaski School in Meriden, criticizes city education officials at Wednesday's public budget hearing.

combined with other increases in the cost of living, she said.

"It's getting tougher to pay the bills, and I already work two jobs," she said.

Lois DeMayo, vice chairwoman of the We the People party, said the taxes are becoming excessive.

"We are so overtaxed now that I don't know how we can afford it anymore," she said.

Ben Wojan said the council should hold off on spending increases, due to looming teacher retirement obligations. He also urged the council to consider using the city-owned

building on Cook Avenue for educational purposes to reduce future expenses.

Nick Macri told the council and the Board of Education to "stop playing games with numbers" and to get to work earlier on budgetary issues. He said the city's governing bodies and even the teachers' union wait until it's too late to come up with real solutions.

"I'm ashamed of what I see and the way you conduct yourselves sometimes," he said.

The Finance Committee will make revisions to Kendzior's budget and vote on its own proposal on April 27. Next month, the full City Council

will vote on a budget which will then go to the mayor for approval.