

# Outlook for Wilbraham in Year 2006

by  
Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham

Year 2005 was a busy year in our community. The two largest happenings were the purchase of the Rice Fruit Farm as conservation land, and the proposed library expansion. At the special Town Meeting and the override vote 11 days later, the voters decided against a larger and more expensive library. We agree that our library needs more space, just not as much as the trustees were asking for.

CCW feels that the most important issue this year should be the Main Street sewer line extension. The high school is overburdening its leach field, and the state has put Minnechaug on notice. Fines could ensue. The CCW believes that we and our community should actively support this project

We feel that the time has come for our community, including CCW, to look seriously at moving forward on the public safety building in some form at a suitable location. Perhaps the building can be scaled bit and made more manageable financially. Additionally, it would make more sense to build this structure on the Boston Road where more than 60% of its business takes place. The, CCW, want to start assuming a positive role in supporting this project. We also support the re-opening of the Woodland Dell Fire Station. The planned opening of this sub-station will significantly improve emergency response times to the southern part of town at minimal cost.

To repair or to replace our beloved Minnechaug continues to be a hot topic. Many of the CCW members do not favor tearing down and rebuilding our High School. (Funding of schools under Chapter 70B, Section 8 only one of the 8 listed priorities appears to apply to Minnechaug.) Number 5 states: **"For the replacement, renovation or modernization of the heating system in any school to increase energy conservation and decrease energy related costs in said schoolhouse"** .

The Regional School Committee has voted to proceed with new design and engineering studies at a cost of about \$880,000. This despite the fact that the Massachusetts School Building Authority final rules will not be issued until July 1, 2006. However, draft regulations are due to come out in January or February of 2006. Let's consider the conundrum about the "run down" condition of the high school. The problem with Minnechaug is that for decades the School Committee and Administration dropped the ball. They conceded that a conscious decision was made to spend money on other educational areas and divert the budgeted maintenance money . A member of the school building committee has recently been quoted as saying "Quite realistically, capital investment in this (Minnechaug) structure over the years has been limited to a roof and a half, two boilers and very little else." Year after year physical problems have become worse. Somehow we, the taxpayers, are made to feel that it is our fault. The School Committee neglected to ask us for money for leaky roofs, asbestos abatement or faulty heating in the classrooms. The buck stops with the Hampden/Wilbraham Regional District School Committee. It is their job to fix these problems. They decided not to fulfill their responsibilities.

There is a huge financial problem looming on the horizon. Many of our town and school employees, the baby boomers, are going to begin retiring soon . A large expense will be coming due for their health for these retirees. The New York Times calls it a time bomb. (December 11, 2005). This "time bomb" is the promise of health care for all retiring employees. This includes teachers and staff and town employees. We must not keep making these kinds of unfunded budget busting promises. There must be an Article in the Town Warrant to help us find out just what the specific financial impact will be in Wilbraham's future. It will likely involve spending money on a consulting actuary

Memorial School has also been the victim of neglect by the Regional School Committee. Deterioration at

Memorial has reached the point where the School Committee has finally felt compelled to request an engineering study to quantify maintenance/upgrade needs.

It is plain to see there are and will continue to be financial difficulties facing our community. If we discipline ourselves, we can find the answers. If we yield to every request or desire, then our problems will only get worse. We cannot continue to allow our property taxes to escalate at three times our cost of living. Clearly, the answer cannot always be raising our taxes. Schools, Sewers, Safety Building, Baby Boomers and Retirees is a full plate. We all must work together to deal with these issues.

**772 words**

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