



# LITTLE COMPTON TAXPAYERS ASSOCIATION

## ● ● NEWSLETTER ● ●

**PO Box 455, Adamsville, RI 02801**

Email: [Taxpayers@cox.net](mailto:Taxpayers@cox.net) Web: [www.LCTaxpayers.com](http://www.LCTaxpayers.com)

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**NEW SCHOOL:** After the Station nightclub fire on February 20, 2003, the Rhode Island Fire Safety Code underwent significant changes. As a result, the Fire Chief (Harry Hallgring Jr.) performed an inspection of the Wilbur & McMahon School on August 11, 2005. Numerous and very costly deficiencies were found.

Given those deficiencies as well as some major structural problems, the School Committee contracted with Mount Vernon Group Architects to perform an assessment of the school during the winter of 2006. On March 21, 2006, Mount Vernon produced a draft summary of its findings.

They estimated \$11 million for repairs, renovations, and meeting code.

Nine months later, on December 12, 2006, the School Committee formed a "School Facilities Committee" to look more deeply into the physical plant situation.

The School Facilities Committee concluded that it needed professional services from an architectural firm to further study the problems and issued a Request For Proposals (RFP) in which the following was said: "Based upon the results of the work of Mount Vernon, the School Facilities Committee has recommended that the Town construct a new school to replace the existing Wilbur & McMahon School." The bids for the architectural firm were due November 13, 2007.

After interviewing four different architectural firms on November 19, 2007, the School Facilities Committee recommended a \$17,500 contract award to JCJ Architecture of Hartford, CT.

On April 16, 2008, JCJ addressed the Committee and presented five options. Three of them involved a totally new school located not more than one mile from the Commons. Options 4 and 5 involved the use of some of the existing structures, demolishing the rest, and building new structures in place of the demolished ones.

The preference at this time seems to be Option 5 which has a price tag of \$25,800,000 and an increase in floor space from 60,895 to 64,160 square feet. Although there are no guarantees, JCJ estimated that 30% of this cost might be borne by the State. If so, Little Compton's share would be \$18 million. Assuming a 3% loan for 30 years, the annual payment from the taxpayers would be approximately \$921,000. This represents a 10% increase in town spending of tax dollars. Put another way, a new school would increase your tax bill by 10%. Add that to the expected 4.75% increase in the regular budget, the tax bill could easily rise by 14.75%. If your tax bill today is \$4,000 for your land and buildings, it could rise to \$4,590 tomorrow with a new \$26 million school.

Something has to be done because the existing school building has major structural problems and does not comply with either the fire code or the life safety code. Because of the enormous

cost of "Option 5", the School Facilities Committee tasked JCJ Architects on August 18, 2007 to revisit the cost of renovation.

Given that this problem has existed for over three years, the original \$11 million estimate from Mount Vernon is probably too low. No decisions have been made yet, but further procrastination will only serve to exacerbate the situation. The Taxpayers Association is closely monitoring this project.

**SCHOOL BUS PRIVATIZATION:** On July 9, 2008, the Little Compton School Committee voted to award a contract for the transportation of Little Compton's students for the next five years to First Student, the company providing service to Tiverton, Portsmouth, Middletown, Newport, Bristol, Warren, Barrington, East Providence, and Newport Community Special Ed. First Student also transports students for many other cities and towns in Rhode Island.

The impetus for this vote is the passage of Senate Bill S-3050, the "Tax Cap" law which mandates the reduction of the maximum amount of money that can be raised from the taxpayers from one year to the next by 1/4 % each year until it reaches 4% in 2013. It is presently 4 3/4 %.

This bill is supported by the Little Compton Taxpayers Association because it prevents runaway property tax hikes. This put the School Committee in the position of looking for savings wherever possible. A savings of close to \$900,000 is projected over the contract period by privatizing the school bussing.

On August 25th, a presentation on the year 2008 bussing of Little Compton students was made by representatives of First Student to concerned parents. The following points were discussed:

- The same drivers and monitors will be driving the same routes as in prior years, with the exception of one driver and one monitor who will not return for personal reasons.
- In January, a fleet of new buses will be put into use as per the contract (the new ones have been ordered).
- The buses will be radio equipped for instant communication with First Student's office in Tiverton. They will also be equipped with electronic devices which guard against mishaps such as a sleeping child left in a bus when parked, or intrusion by an unauthorized person.
- Each driver will receive 52 hours of safety training, will get additional special needs training, and will also participate in monthly safety meetings.
- Students will receive school bus safety training.
- There will be zero tolerance of unsafe behavior and conditions. Safety drills will be conducted with the students.

- The Little Compton bussing policies which have been in effect will not be changed. First Student will not unilaterally change any policies without School Committee consent.

Several years ago, the Little Compton Taxpayers Association identified our school transportation costs as among the highest in the state. The data came from reports each town in Rhode Island made to the State Department of Education. Little Compton averaged \$840 per student per year during the five year period of school years ending in 2002 through 2006. During the school year 2003/2004 the towns of Tiverton, Portsmouth, Middletown, Newport, Bristol, Warren, and East Providence averaged \$352 per student. These towns were serviced by Laidlaw, the predecessor to First Student.

The present financial crisis in state and municipal governments requires the scrutiny of all aspects of every budget to look for ways to reduce spending. The problem is not that we don't tax enough, but that we spend too much. Pensions and Health benefits for part time jobs are no longer affordable or sustainable. An example is Little Compton's history on pension costs. This fiscal year has a town pension cost of \$338,040. In 1992 the pension contribution by the town was only \$38,000. It is not difficult to see where this trend is taking us.

The School Committee members who voted to extricate Little Compton from the transportation business are to be commended for their courageous stand. First Student, with 60,000 buses transporting over 3,000,000 students in the United States and Canada, is certainly capable of safely and efficiently transporting Little Compton's 450+ students.

Despite all the hype, the sky did not fall.

**FIRE PROTECTION:** For 3 years we have been urging our Fire Department to adopt an innovative fire suppression technology called "Compressed Air Foam System" (CAFS). CAFS will mitigate the tide of fire losses that we have experienced over the past decade. CAFS is ideal for towns with no municipal water supply and minimal manpower. CAFS's ability to quickly suppress fires with a minimal supply of water is legendary.

Amazingly there has been a wall of resistance to CAFS put up by our "professional" firefighters. We have been accused of "picking on the Fire Department." "What business is it of the Taxpayers Association?" they ask. The short answer to that question is simple: the taxpayers of Little Compton are spending a lot of money to provide fire protection that is not up to snuff.

In our efforts to introduce CAFS, we made a formal presentation to the Town Council. We even brought in CAFS expert and author, Dominic Colletti, to address the meeting. The Council was very receptive to CAFS and ordered our then new Fire Chief Harry Hallgring Jr. to conduct an evaluation of the subject and report back to them with his recommendations.

Chief Hallgring's initial response was surprisingly negative. The Fire Chief said that "CAFS might be a good *tool* for the fire department, but it was not a *silver bullet*." He added that "We do not have a water problem, we have a manpower problem." He claimed that our shortage of water for firefighting could be resolved by installing dry hydrants around town (pipes into ponds that the fire truck can pump water from) and employing large diameter hose to pump water from ponds over great distances to fire scenes.

Could it be that our firefighters believe that CAFS is a threat to their job security? In spite of the fact that Chief Hallgring later changed his mind on the overall benefits of CAFS and chaired the committee to implement a CAFS retrofit for Engine 1, there still remains significant and uninformed resistance to change on the part of the firefighters.

On Feb 14<sup>th</sup> 2008, the Town Council voted to retrofit Engine 1 with a compressed air foam system. They ordered Chief Hallgring to prepare and submit a Request For Proposals (RFP) to install the system. However on the evening that bids were to be opened, Acting Fire Chief Lt. Wood announced that Engine 2 had broken down and was permanently out of service. This meant that Engine 1 could not be taken out of service for upgrading until a replacement for Engine 2 could be obtained.

That is where we stand today, half a year later... there is still no back-up pumper.

In light of our latest major fire loss, a new home under construction on South Shore Road where our firefighters admittedly ran out of water, we have once again raised the issue. We met with Town Council President Bob Mushen, Council member Chuck Appleton, and Chief Rob Wimer. We wanted to know why there has been no success in securing a replacement for Engine 2 allowing the Council approved upgrading of Engine 1. We strongly suggested that CAFS *may* have made a difference in the outcome of the South Shore Road fire.



Fire on South Shore Road

We have been assured that "The goal of acquiring a back-up pumper has been identified to the Chief as urgent."

During the meeting we had the opportunity to ask our new Fire Chief what his plans were to improve fire protection for our community. Chief Wimer said his first priority was to improve the Volunteer Fire Department. As his second priority, he said that he was developing plans for the installation of dry hydrants at several ponds to improve the water supply for firefighting. Chief Wimer added that "...he feel like CAFS is being jammed down his throat." New Chief, same old story.

We sense a high level of frustration on the part of management to deal with what appears to be the "siege mentality" of the paid fire department staff. We believe that through a misguided fear of losing their jobs, some paid members of the fire department have done everything within their means to thwart the implementation of CAFS. The irony of the situation is that in addition to *being five times more effective than plain water, CAFS enhances safety of firefighters and substantially reduces their workload.* Go figure!

In earlier newsletters we have commented on the decline in membership of the Volunteer Fire Department (VFD). That once robust organization has dwindled to a mere handful of personnel. We have staunchly supported their fund raising activities and applaud the VFD contributions to the community.

However, if the number of volunteers continues to decline, the town will inevitably be forced to double the number of full time firefighters to meet the manning requirements of the National Fire Protection Association and the State of RI. The budget of the fire department is now close to one million dollars a year. Each additional person added to the payroll could increase the budget by more than 65 thousand dollars a year, plus many years of liability for pensions and health care benefits.

Our town leaders need to reach out to other rural communities to seek solutions to these persistent problems. They should not have to reinvent the wheel. *Little Compton is not unique in its need for fire protection faced with limited water supply and manpower.* All of the head-scratching and countless meetings have yet to produce any improvement in our level of fire protection. Think of how it would feel to see your home burn to the ground because our firefighters ran out of water?

It is time for the LCFD employees to stop whining and embrace CAFS as a means of dramatically improving their fire suppression capabilities. It is something we will all benefit from. It is also time for our VFD to come to grip with the reality of their dwindling membership before they become history, as has been the case with so many other volunteer organizations in towns with mixed paid and volunteer fire departments.

To all parties with the **responsibility** of providing us with fire protection, we say, "If you are not part of the **solution**, you are part of the **problem**."

**ENERGY:** The cost of energy is a component of every part of our economy and our standard of living. We have used fossil fuels for centuries while refining their use by technology to increase efficiency by reducing the cost and protecting the environment. To suggest that there is a "silver bullet" to replace that energy in the near term or over the foreseeable future is a fantasy. We will, if we pursue that course, reduce our standard of living dramatically and place our lives and nation in jeopardy. The early result of that policy is all around us with the increase in prices for everything we eat or use. Unless you act, it will get worse, MUCH WORSE!

The claim that we cannot "drill" our way out of this is wrong! That is like saying we can't farm our way out of starvation! We have ample quantities of supply off the shores of North America to enable us to no longer need foreign oil and make a difference in the cost of fuel. The Canadians are exploiting that source and selling it to us. The Chinese are assisting the Cubans in drilling off our Florida coast. Why shouldn't we drill there ourselves? Meanwhile, we are paying exorbitant prices to OPEC and squandering our national wealth and security to do it.

Our elected officials have pandered to special interests and failed to enact sound long-term energy policy. Now, the Democrat controlled Congress is blocking exploration and drilling off our coasts and on public lands. The reason is ideology, not sound energy policy. The large oil companies will not fight this policy since the Congress has done everything it can to discredit them

and portray them as plundering capitalists. So the oil companies simply buy the oil from OPEC, mark it up, and sell it to us to our detriment. The oil companies in turn pay BILLIONS in taxes on those sales to the government. It has become a golden goose for the government.

Our all-Democrat delegation in Congress - Jack Reed, Sheldon Whitehouse, Patrick Kennedy, and Jim Langevin - support this foolish policy. We need to do two things, TELL THEM WE DON'T APPROVE or, if that fails to work, replace them.

Senator Jack Reed	528-5200
Senator Sheldon Whitehouse	453-5294
Congressman Patrick Kennedy	729-5600
Congressman Jim Langevin	732-9400

CALL THEM, TELL THEM --- Drill here, Drill now, Pay Less.

**TAX ASSESSMENTS:** Are you tired of the hocus-pocus involved in assessing the value of your property? Are you upset because a home in your neighborhood was sold at a high price... and YOUR TAXES WENT UP as a result? There are better ways to do this. California has Proposition 13. Here's what they say on their web site: "Year after year, Proposition 13 has kept a 1% cap on California property taxes, and limited annual increases to 2%. If you have property here in the Golden State, you've benefited directly from this historic piece of legislation. And the longer you've owned your home, the more you've saved!" It works. Little Compton has nothing. This is something that is long overdue for scrutiny. Your Taxpayers Association is now looking into this issue.

**LOCAL TAX CAP?** In the article above the bus privatization issue was defined. Nearly \$900,000 is the saving for FIVE years. It was over ten years ago that we identified this cost issue and fought hard to change it. We leave it to you to do the arithmetic - delay costs the taxpayers MILLIONS.

So, why now you ask? Well the up front reason was the tax cap recently passed by the legislature forced our hand leading to the privatization of school transportation. It was either that, or lose instructional capability. It seems apparent that a tax cap works. If it does indeed work as the Governor hoped, then there are a number of opportunities right here in Little Compton. They are here, right now, and doable but without a cap they will not get done. The only flaw in the tax cap law is the inevitable loop holes and the slow progress of reduction in the permissive taxing authority. We have the ability as taxpayers in Little Compton to have a local tax cap. Would it not be grand to have ONE year without the inevitable creep in the tax rate? Imagine no tax increase!

Do you think local cap a good idea? Think we can do it? Do you want to do it? Let us know by sending us email or snail mail. Taxpayers@cox.net is for email, and the regular mail address is LC Taxpayers Association, PO Box 455, Adamsville, RI 02801.

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**Notice to our members:** We will have our Annual Meeting at the Community Center at 7:00 pm on Sep. 24, 2008. New memberships accepted at the door. Consider joining. No other organization represents your interests as we do.

Little Compton Taxpayers Association  
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Adamsville, RI 02801

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**LITTLE COMPTON TAXPAYERS ASSOCIATION MEMBERSHIP FORM** (Vol. IX, No. 1)

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EMAIL \_\_\_\_\_

**Local Home Address**  Check if year-round address

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

HOME PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

**Second Home Address**  From \_\_\_\_\_ To \_\_\_\_\_ (Month/Day)

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/TOWN \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

HOME PHONE \_\_\_\_\_

SUGGESTED CONTRIBUTION: \$10 (Single) \$15 (Family) \$\_\_\_\_\_ (Other)

Mail this form and your contribution to: Little Compton Taxpayers Association  
PO Box 455