Amherst Budget Coordinating Group
Summary Points – February 4, 2010

At our February 4th meeting, the members of the Budget Coordinating Group agreed that the following points would be conveyed to our home boards and committees:

- That the BCG recognizes that the process we created for determining override recommendations has impacted the existing budget processes of the School Committees and the Library Trustees. We are grateful for their accommodation.

- That our current working total for recommended restorations is $1,821,282, representing:

    - $488,830 for the Town (with one restoration -- 50% of street lights, totaling $48,000 – eliminated from the prior restoration list);

    - $1,087,315 for the Regional Schools (Amherst's share of restorations that would total $1.4 million for the Region);

    - $176,000 for the Elementary Schools;

    - $69,137 for the Libraries (with three restorations eliminated from the prior list – Office Assistant hours, COLAs for temp staff and office supplies, totaling $19,995)

  These numbers are subject to further refinement with next week's School Committee meetings, and a worksheet with updated numbers will be provided at Wednesday's BCG meeting (10:15 a.m. – location TBD)

- That in response to inquiries regarding delay of an override vote, general agreement among BCG members was to keep the March 23rd date. (Several spoke in favor of keeping the date; some offered no opinion; some noted that the question was raised by their home committees; no one spoke in favor of a later date.) Reasons cited for keeping the date included:

    - The extensive joint financial planning process that has been working toward this date for many months;

    - That uncertainties remain with any date;

    - That knowing whether or not money from an override would be available before going to Town Meeting is preferable;

    - That having an override vote occur during Town Meeting would be complicated and distracting and would necessitate suspending the meeting to postpone budget consideration;

    - That a later date would impact the other three towns in the Region, which would have already had their Annual Town Meetings;

- That there has been significant organizational focus on preparing for March 23rd, including staff anticipation of that date as when they will know if their jobs will be saved or lost;
- The difficulty in justifying special election expenses when the point of the override is a shortage of funds;
- That the sooner the override result is known, the sooner budget and programmatic adjustments can be made;
- Better voter participation to be expected at the Annual Town election.

- That after considering pros and cons of different question structures, the group's support has generally aligned around a single ballot question specifying the amounts for Towns, Elementary Schools, Regional Schools and Libraries.

  Consideration was given to a Menu style; with points raised in support including:

  - It lets voters choose the areas they prioritize for funding;
  - It allows voters who might oppose one budget area to support the others without having to vote against the whole thing;

  Points raised against a Menu included:

  - A single question presents an opportunity to bring the community together to support all its services, instead of potentially pitting one against another;
  - The potential for divisiveness leading up to the vote, and the bitterness afterwards if some budgets win and others lose, is damaging to the community;
  - A single question is consistent with the cooperative and coordinated BCG process that considered the budget needs and priorities of all Town services.
  - That as Town leaders seeking an override because we believe the projected revenue shortfall makes it impossible to adequately fund core services town-wide, our recommendation to the voters should offer a town-wide solution.

  Brief consideration was given to a Pyramid style, in which a higher and lower number are offered to voters, and that was regarded as antithetical to our process of trying to identify the smallest possible amount needed to maintain vital programs and services.

- That we will discuss reserve policy at our next meeting, and whether we should address the end-of-year surplus that conservative budgeting typically yields: by seeking to spend some of it, or by making a statement in support continuing to it accrue to reserves. If possible, the Finance Committee will provide a recommendation on the topic.

- That in order for BCG to recommend override language to the Select Board that includes distributions for the Elementary and Regional Schools, and the Libraries, a vote to support those distributions by those respective elected bodies is necessary. Without such support, it would not make sense to include any request for override funds on their behalf.