

WINTHROP

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## High school fees set

### Cost for activities \$100 per student

By **Katheleen Conti, Globe Staff** | July 31, 2008

As the voice vote was being cast, School Committee member John Macero, with tensed shoulders and a dejected look, turned away and joined the chorus of ayes.

With that unanimous vote, Winthrop High School students for the first time will have to pay a fee to participate in activities such as yearbook, Student Council, and drama. The fee was set at a flat \$100 per student for an unlimited amount of activities.

"I didn't like voting 'yes,'" Macero said later. "I tried to put the point across [at the meeting last Thursday] that high school kids, we really do need to focus on them right now. We have to give them the best opportunity to compete with other high school kids statewide, nationwide, townwide. We're already at a disadvantage when we have to charge \$100 for our kids to be in the Student Council."

With the School Department still trying to close the books on last fiscal year's \$448,000 deficit, and trying to cut \$1.4 million from the current budget to avoid falling into another deficit, School Committee chairwoman Pat Milano said administrators have been forced to look at "alternative revenue streams to offset budget shortfalls."

Several failed Proposition 2 1/2 override attempts, increases in fixed costs, and stagnant state funds led to an administrative decision four years ago to stop funding athletics, which have since been paid for through sports fees and by the non profit Viking Pride Foundation. School administrators said those same circumstances, under tougher economic times, forced the decision to cut funding for other extracurricular activities at the high school this year and to shift the money to academics.

The cost of the activities has been about \$40,000 per year, according to numbers presented by School Committee member Gus Martucci. Viking Pride donations have consisted of \$35,000 each for sports and activities in the past, but because of the increase in sports fees this year, foundation members decided to increase the sports donation to \$50,000, said chairman Albert Petrilli. He said the foundation's contribution to extracurriculars might drop to \$15,000 this year.

"We're not happy," Petrilli said. "Many cities and towns are doing the same thing, but you can't let this just run away from us and think that this is acceptable, which it's not. It's upsetting, especially since we're not making progress."

Petrilli said he hopes the \$15,000 donation can reduce the \$100 activities fee to about \$65 or \$70 per student.

Milano told the committee it is likely that the new fee will lead to a decrease in participation.

"We asked the [Town] Council to implement a trash fee to offset the budget shortfall. Some folks in town were up in arms that we would have the audacity to ask for that," Milano said. "All these fees target the families of this town. They're not borne by residents in an equitable way."

Macero said that when he was the fine arts director in Saugus, about four years ago, fees were implemented for drama, bands, and chorus. But those activities also brought in revenue from performances. It was very hard, he said, to try to introduce a fee for students involved in activities that didn't bring in money.

As for Winthrop, he said he would have liked more time to discuss other options to the fee.

"I will imagine there will be kids who choose not to do it, and that's a shame," Macero said of after-school activities. "They can't put that [activity] in their college resume. Colleges are looking for the well-rounded student. Students that are heavily involved in high school, in sports and activities, they're committed to their school. . . ."

"Some people will be very disheartened and disappointed that we had to come to this."

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