

Sentinel Editorial

Conval choice

It was quite the coincidence. Last month, voters in the Conval Regional School District rejected the three major articles on the school warrant: the operating budget, a \$5.5 million bond for building renovations and a teachers contract. That left the district with the default budget, which is \$493,529 less than the one that was shot down. Extremely difficult cuts were in the offing.

Then, at its very next meeting, the Conval Regional School Board discovered that it had about \$450,000 more than it had expected, money saved from health insurance. If the voters had known about that windfall when they went to the polls, or if the board had

THE BOARD HAS TO DECIDE BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND PROPERTY TAXES.

factored it in its budget proposal, do you suppose they might have made different choices?

Now, unless there are new unexpected expenses or savings on the horizon, the school board could take one of two broad directions, or somehow split the difference.

1) It could spend that \$450,000 — the exact amount will be known later this week — on the sorts of things the voters rejected. And that was the members' first instinct, although some have been having second thoughts. The board has been pondering whether it should spend quite a bit of the money on upgrades to various buildings, upgrades that had been part of the warrant articles that got shot down. There is also the possibility that some of the money could be used for other worthwhile expenses, some of them contractual obligations, to stretch that default budget a bit further.

2) The board could follow the voters' pretty explicit directions and cut enough programs and personnel to make ends meet with the default budget alone. That would entail using the health-insurance savings to reduce property-tax bills in the district. Temple selectman John Kieley laid out that argument at a recent board meeting, "The voters said they want you to spend the default budget. They didn't say they wanted you to spend the default budget and the surplus from last year."

What a choice for the board: between the immediate interests of the schoolchildren in its care and of the property owners who elected them.

Even in ordinary times, decisions such as this can be very difficult in a state that places so much of the burden of public education on a whacky collection of town-by-town property taxes. The Conval district covers Antrim, Bennington, Dublin, Francestown, Greenfield, Hancock, Peterborough, Sharon and Temple. Last year, the tax rates for those towns ranged from \$24.14 per \$1,000 of assessed value to \$17.22.

During the worst recession in most people's memories, with people at risk of losing their jobs and their health insurance, the choice between the schools and the taxes seems excruciating for the board. As Gail Cromwell, the Temple school board representative, said, it is "almost in an impossible situation."

The board's duty, however, should be to provide the best education it can for the district's students with the money the taxpayers have authorized it to spend in the budget. And, despite the desirability of the additional spending, the taxpayers have spoken.