

## Duanesburg Students Discuss NYS Budget Reform

Students from Duanesburg High School in Delanson, New York taped a special “Election 2005 Edition Student Town Meeting” on Wednesday, October 12<sup>th</sup> in WAMC’s Performing Arts Studio. Their topic: *Reforming the Budget Process: the Proposed Constitutional Amendment - Yea or Nay?* Moderated by WAMC’s Alan Chartock, the panel discussion involved members of the senior class sharing their views and asking questions of Barbara Bartoletti, Legislative Director, NYS League of Women Voters; Robert B. Ward, author of *New York State Government: What It Does, How It Works* and Director of Research, NYS Business Council; and Maryanne Malecki, Education Director at WAMC.

The topic was selected in July by Duanesburg’s Participation in Government teachers David Christopher and Karen Kanarkiewicz after viewing the Rockefeller Institute Public Policy Forum videotape on the amendment debate. When the school year began, the students used an instructional unit developed by Maryanne Malecki to be used in the classroom in conjunction with this video, and selections from Bob Ward’s book dealing with the budget process itself. (The Rockefeller Institute distributed the videotape and instructional unit to teachers across New York in September. Copies of the unit are also available on our Web site, [www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org](http://www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org), “Instructional Materials”.) In addition, the students tracked coverage of this issue in print and electronic media, and discussed the proposed amendment with their families and neighbors to determine the level of community awareness concerning the issue.

Amendments to constitutions are generally proposed to fix or solve a problem, and the students quickly identified New York’s problem to be its chronically-late budget. Although the budget was on time in 2005, Barbara Bartoletti indicated how the new amendment, known as Proposition 1, would ensure that on-time budgets continue, since it would change the start of the state fiscal year from April 1<sup>st</sup> to May 1<sup>st</sup>, allowing more time for better accounting of tax revenues. Also included is a two-year appropriation requirement in the governor’s budget for aid to the more than 700 school districts in the state.

Ms. Bartoletti stated that two important new features of the amendment are the Independent Budget Office (IBO) and the automatic imposition of a contingency budget. The IBO, composed of independent fiscal experts, would provide the Legislature with detailed information related to the budgetary process, including an annual economic and revenue forecast, a three-year fiscal outlook, quarterly reports on state revenues and fiscal impact statements on proposed legislation. A contingency budget would automatically be imposed if a new budget is not adopted by May 1. This contingency budget would continue the previous year's budget for the ensuing fiscal year, providing the same appropriations, re-appropriations, spending and revenue provisions as enacted, with a few exceptions for public assistance, school aid, state employee health insurance and pension costs, debt service and certain federal funds required by federal law.

Student panelists questioned how members of the IBO would be selected or appointed, and whether this amendment would encourage late budgets, since there would be little

incentive to pass a budget on time. They also pointed out that the legislature would then become more powerful than the governor in the budget process, thus rewarding them for not doing their job of passing an on-time budget in the first place. Ms. Bartoletti countered that, once the new appropriations bill was passed by the Legislature, the governor would retain his right to line-item veto any of the appropriations deemed excessive or to veto the entire multiple appropriations budget.

The NYS Business Council opposes the proposed amendment, and Bob Ward said that the more important form of budget reform is the limitation of state spending, which regularly increases when left to the legislature. He indicated, as evidence, the more than \$12 billion it has added to the governor's proposed budgets during the past 10 years. He said a number of other states have constitutional spending limits based on factors such as population growth and/or personal-income growth. Mr. Ward would like to hold the state to the same disclosure standards as school districts, which must notify residents of spending, taxes and rate of inflation.

The students discovered that, despite some information available to the public in the media, members of their families, community and citizens at-large are generally unaware of Proposition 1, although they certainly are aware of the problem of late state budgets. They also found many voters to be frustrated with legislators, calling them “dysfunctional” and irresponsible. As one student succinctly put it, “If *we* don’t do *our* jobs, we don’t get to keep them.”

When Dr. Chartock called for a voice vote, a surprising 2/3 of the students on the panel and in the audience indicated their opposition to Proposition 1. They defended their decision by stating that the amendment would not fix all the problems with the state’s budget; it would not guarantee an on-time budget; and it generally would give poorly-performing elected officials more power than they deserved. Those in favor supported the League’s idea of a more “transparent” budget process, and liked the idea of a contingency budget. And, when asked why this issue is important to high school students, everyone made the connection between late state budgets and school financial concerns. Many commented on increased taxes, cut programs and staff, and a general inability to realistically plan for school expenditures without an on-time state budget.

Regardless of the outcome on November 8<sup>th</sup>, everyone on the panel agreed that this special Student Town Meeting was truly demonstrating participation in government *in action*.

WAMC Northeast Public Radio’s Youth Media Project: Student Town Meetings are made possible through the generous support of the Educational Foundation of America and Carl E. Touhey.

You can learn more about this project, as well as listen to this and other previously conducted Student Town Meetings, by contacting Maryanne Malecki at 465-5233 ext. 135, or [mmalecki@wamc.org](mailto:mmalecki@wamc.org), or on the Web at <http://www.wamcstudenttownmeetings.org>.

