

TheADVOCATE

<http://www.stamfordadvocate.com/news/local/scn-sa-stamecs4apr29,0,1310868.story?coll=stam-news-local-headlines>

Lawmakers seek to change Stamford's image

By Donna Porstner
Staff Writer

April 29, 2007

STAMFORD - Trying to change Stamford's image as an affluent corporate mecca, state lawmakers are bringing State House Majority Leader Christopher Donovan, D-Meriden, to town to show him how the other half - or rather 44 percent - live.

The tour, scheduled for tomorrow morning at K.T. Murphy Elementary School in the city's working-class Cove neighborhood, is expected to highlight the needs of Stamford's poorest students.

"The leadership has got to see these kids, because there is so much misinformation out there in the state - and in the legislature - about Fairfield County and Stamford. We are working people," said state Rep. William Tong, D-Stamford, who organized the meeting. "We made a special invitation to the majority leader to come down and see it with his own eyes."

Tong said he is trying to dispel the myth that, "we're this monolithic community of wealthy people, and that the Grand List we have takes care of us."

In Stamford, 44.1 percent of public school students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches compared with a statewide average of 26.9 percent. About 35 percent come from homes where English is not the primary language, and they have language and cultural barriers that make educating them more expensive. About 15 percent of students are enrolled in English as a second language classes, according to Board of Education records.

"This is just another effort to combat the image that Stamford is just shiny office buildings and not people struggling to pay the bills," said state Rep. James Shapiro, D-Stamford.

State Reps. Carlo Leone, Christel Truglia and Gerald Fox III - all Democrats representing Stamford - are expected to attend, along with School Superintendent Joshua Starr.

Stamford would get \$7.7 million in education funding under the Democrats' proposed state budget, up from nearly \$5.9 million in the current year.

"Stamford pays more than 90 percent of our own education costs," Tong said. "Other cities do get much

THE VOLVO

80th

anniversary
CELEBRATION



2007 VOLVO XC70
AWD LEASE OFFER

\$379

LEASE PER MONTH
FOR 24 MONTHS

CLICK HERE



more help, and that's just got to stop."

Stamford would continue to receive less education funding than small towns like Coventry, Mansfield, Putnam, Stafford and Wolcott under the Democrats' budget proposal.

Norwalk, which has nearly 30 percent fewer public school students than Stamford, would receive \$9.2 million for education under the Democrats' budget. That amount is up from \$8.7 million in the current year.

The disparity between Stamford's share of education dollars and that of smaller towns with less demonstrated need is startling, city Director of Administration Sandra Dennies said.

"I just don't understand how they can continue to ignore Stamford," she said.

Stamford would get \$11 million for education under Gov. M. Jodi Rell's budget proposal and \$8.2 million under a budget proposal presented by House Republicans.

Even though Stamford would get the most education funding from Rell's budget, legislators from the city say her plan is unlikely to be approved because of bipartisan opposition to raising the state income tax that would pay for the increased funding.

"The governor's budget, in my view, is ancient history," Tong said. "It's not going to happen."

Lawmakers say they hope Donovan will see similarities between the students at K.T. Murphy School and students in his hometown of Meriden, which has a slightly smaller minority population than Stamford but a much larger percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches. Meriden would receive \$52.3 million in Education Cost Sharing Grant funds next year under the Democrats' budget, up from \$46.6 million. Meriden's public schools have 8,874 students enrolled - 42 percent fewer than Stamford's 15,130, according to the most recent Strategic School Profiles.

Asked why the Stamford delegation chose K.T. Murphy School, Tong said, "We wanted to make sure we focused on a school with a diverse population that provided a good cross-section of the city, had a good number of English as a second language learners. It's important to show him a school that's representative of our city."

Shapiro, vice chairman of the legislature's Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee, said getting Donovan's ear is important because he'll be one of the few leaders involved in final budget negotiations.

"It's good to have as many of those people on your side as possible," Shapiro said.

Asked how willing the Democratic leadership will be to adjust its budget proposal to give more funding to Stamford, Tong said, "I don't know how realistic that is, but I'm trying."

Donovan said the visit should help give him a better understanding the Stamford legislators' position.

"I think it's good to see what the Stamford delegation is lobbying for," he said. "I don't want to rely on impressions. I'll rely on a firsthand view."

Tong, who grew up in the Hartford area, said he knows how removed upstate residents are from Fairfield County. If they were to visit, he said, it would be an eye-opener.

"Like many in the Hartford area, I thought of Stamford as more of a part of New York than a part of Connecticut - more New York Yankees than Boston Red Sox," he said. "Stamford was just a place you passed through on your way to New York City."

Copyright © 2007, Southern Connecticut Newspapers, Inc.

