

In the Arena
By Tom Conroy
April 2008

Overrides and Booster Seats

"The override" was the phrase of the month in the three towns that I am privileged to represent, as each town had one, with Sudbury's and Wayland's the most contentious. Neither of Sudbury's override options passed. Wayland's did. Why?

Many folks in both towns undoubtedly have opinions about why their override passed or didn't pass. In Sudbury, many point to the fact that there was an override last year. Others say because we're in a recession and household budgets are constrained. Still others mention that with a significant drop in real estate values, it becomes more onerous to endure a significant property tax increase. The list goes on.

The most important differences, however, may have been grass roots organizing and citizens willing to volunteer for town office. In Wayland, grass roots organizing takes form in SOS, Wayland eNews, and the Wayland Voters Network. Even though these organizations are not all pro-override, they engage people in the election process. As for citizens willing to serve as elected town officials, Wayland had multiple races (Selectmen, School Committee) that were keenly competitive. The result: Voter participation in Wayland for the override and town elections was 51%. In Sudbury, participation was 38%. The override in Sudbury lost by 660 votes. An additional 13% voter participation in Sudbury equates to about 1,436 votes.

Will a group of engaged citizens in Sudbury step up and start a grass roots organization via email to educate and mobilize a large group of friends, neighbors, and like-minded residents around important issues facing their community?

Last week I read that the Governor was debating whether to sign a House and Senate-approved bill to mandate the use of booster seats for children under the age of eight and less than four feet nine inches tall. That night, I brought this news home to my youngest daughter Sophia, who at age 6 and three quarters, has been looking forward to the day when she could remove her booster seat from our car.

She was not pleased to learn about the bill.

I hoped this could be a teachable moment. We discussed the bill. I asked her if she wanted to write the Governor a letter about it. We made a pro and con chart. On the pro side, we had improved child safety, lower health care

expenditures for children injured during accidents, and cleanliness (car seats remained cleaner as long as juice, raisins, and crackers are spilled on booster seats). On the con side, we had "ease of use" or "freedom." She was torn about whether to ask the Governor to sign or veto the bill. I did not explain libertarianism.

A couple of nights later, I came home to inform her that the Governor had signed the bill. She was still conflicted, but she did not speak disparagingly of the Governor. We had some ice cream.

Last week on Beacon Hill the House of Representatives debated and passed a bill that lowers taxes for small businesses here in the Commonwealth, while preventing large multinational companies with sophisticated accounting schemes from hiding their profits from the Massachusetts tax code.

Having met recently with both the Sudbury Chamber of Commerce and the Wayland Business Association, I am pleased to report that I kept my word to them: I supported the House-passed tax rate reduction from 9.5% to 7.5% by 2012 as part of the bill. It is hoped that this tax relief will allow small businesses to more successfully weather the ongoing downturn in the economy, and further the perception that Massachusetts is business friendly.

Estimates of the revenue that the new law would generate for the Commonwealth vary, but most projections are in the \$200 - \$220 million range. This amount compares quite directly with the \$233 million increase in state aid that was preliminarily agreed to last month by the Governor, the House, and the Senate. Under the agreement, Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland would see increases of 5% - 6% each for the state fiscal year starting July 1, 2008. This would amount to nearly \$1 million in increased aid over the current year, bringing the total for the three towns to nearly \$15 million. My goal is to secure annual increases in state aid at percentages well above inflation, so that we can reduce the prevalence of overrides in our towns. .

The Senate is expected to pass the corporate tax reform bill soon, and the Governor, who proposed the idea last year, will certainly sign it into law.

Tom Conroy is the state representative for Lincoln, Sudbury, and Wayland and can be contacted at Rep.ThomasConroy@hou.state.ma.us .