

# Revisiting override resistance: Southampton aims to mount campaign

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SOUTHAMPTON - Residents of this southwestern Hampshire County town have rejected requests for overrides of the tax-limiting constraints of Proposition 2½ no less than 33 times in the past decade. In an effort to change that track record, town officials say they intend to conduct an intensive public education campaign to try to convince residents that the time has come to bust free of the limits set by the legislation.

"People don't make the connection that police cars, fire trucks, ambulances and services cost money," said Selectmen's Chairman Jess Dods. "There's no free lunch."

The 2008 budget is approximately \$12,424,191, according to David Kielson, town accountant. Department heads have been asked to turn their 2009 budget requests in this week, and selectmen project that the requested budget will be \$13 million to \$14 million, which they are estimating will need to be trimmed to \$12 million, Selectman Michael Phelan said at a board meeting in December.

In order to keep the budget parallel to departmental needs, selectmen propose that the town pass an override of Proposition 2½, but they have not yet decided what the override will be for. The law limits property tax increases to 2.5 percent each year in state cities and towns. It was passed in 1980 and took effect in 1982. Dods said an override is the only way the town can maintain its current level of services. "We haven't decided yet what we're going to do," Dods said about the campaign Thursday. "We simply want to get more awareness around."

Selectmen are expected to continue the override discussion when they meet tonight at 7 at the Town Hall on East Street.

Specifically, Dods said, the campaign would increase public awareness about how fixed costs, such as oil and health insurance, are rising faster than the board's ability to raise taxes.

"We can't say no to Exxon or Blue Cross Blue Shield because we need those rates," Dods said. "I think people symbolically say no because they can. No taxes is a good thing for them. This country was founded on a tax revolution."

One consequence of fixed costs outpacing the town's ability to raise taxes is the decrease in funding for departments such as elder services, parks and recreation, while continuing to fund the town accountant, town clerk, building inspector and other departments as required by law.

Dods maintains that Southampton's population has increased by more than 30 percent between 1990 and 2005, and that its town departments are understaffed in comparison to surrounding towns.

"We've been striving to get an override for years," said Peter Valinski, chairman of the Finance Committee. "You spend a lot of time and you try to get this thing passed and you don't get anywhere."

Valinski said he expects this will be a tough year, and that the finance panel hopes to get some guidance from selectmen to educate the town about an override campaign, even though the committee is planning for 2009 without an override.

### **Leading the Way**

Colleen Corona, chairwoman of the board of selectmen from the town of Easton, addressed Southamptton selectmen about how her board convinced voters to approve a \$3.4 million override after 15 years of failed override requests. Corona has visited at least 10 towns since she made a speech about Easton's 2006 override at the Massachusetts Municipal Association's annual meeting last January, including her visit to Southamptton in November. "Any override causes divisions in the community," Corona said Friday.

In the past year 48 overrides were attempted in the state, half of which passed, noted Southamptton Town Administrator Diana Schindler at a board meeting.

Corona said the public can learn about the town's needs by beginning with the most basic level of teaching local government to voters.

"We found that once we really went out there and explained the budget process, people understood why we needed the money," Corona said.

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