

The Prize Is The Referendum

A public hearing on my Tax Cap Ordinance took place at the high school on Monday night. I am publishing my closing statement in the paragraphs that follow for those who were unable to make the public hearing, and to ensure you hear, directly from me, my reasons for tabling the Tax Cap Ordinance.

I have tabled the ordinance in favor of a Charter Amendment to transform the current financial town meeting (FTM) into a voting referendum, which many on both sides of the debate spoke in favor of last night. I believe this is the prize that Tiverton seriously needs to allow more citizen participation in the budget process. I am certain we will see a robust dialogue surrounding this issue in the coming months. My hope is we can collaborate and work towards a common understanding for the entire community.

Closing Statement

I want to thank all the members of our community who came to this hearing tonight to discuss this important initiative. I have listened very carefully to all the remarks and arguments made over the last few months, and before the council this evening. It's been a long night on a very important topic and I think we have all done ourselves and the town a great service to have this conversation.

It is clear to me that we have the votes on the council to pass this ordinance tonight. I firmly believe that by passing this ordinance we provide additional taxpayer protections that are currently lacking in a process widely seen as unfair or even illegal by many who reside in Tiverton today. After 23% of tax increases over the last 3 years, combined with crumbling roads, a landfill to close, and a high school in need of extensive repair it is abundantly clear we need to consider efficiencies and longer-term financial strategies to ensure we preserve our limited resources. In the 6 years from 2004-2010 Tiverton has experienced the second highest rate of property tax growth in a state known nationally for high property taxes. This has a real cost to our families and to our children.

Recently, this council learned from the George Wiley Center that Tiverton had over 250 utility shut offs due to financial difficulties this past winter. In a recent conversation I had with Dennis Roy, the CEO of East Bay Community Action, over 400 families need heating assistance to get through the winter in our town. Hundreds more use the food bank. This is a real human cost.

When I hear remarks about cutting services, I ask myself if these families agree that raising taxes year after year is the right course of action. We can no longer afford to fund generous pay, benefit and retirement packages to our public employees and still provide quality services to all our residents. We have difficult choices to make, which we can no longer delay.

These are the direct and indirect consequences of an economy reeling from the high costs of poor government policies. Put bluntly, every time we raise taxes above inflation, it means more dark, cold nights and empty pantries for our most needy residents. Putting Tiverton's financial house in order will allow us to address our most urgent needs and set our priorities according to the needs of all our residents.

I understand the argument that the will of the people, or at least a small fraction of our population, is expressed at the FTM. I also appreciate that the will of far more people is also expressed through their representatives elected by democratic elections. I also believe that this ordinance should not be necessary because there is a state tax cap, and if prior town councils had followed R.I. general Law 44-5-2, we probably would not be here tonight.

I believe the most important thing Tiverton can do is to transform the budget process into an institution which properly serves the widest possible spectrum of the population, while eliminating low participation and intimidation at the FTM that many find intolerable. A referendum is key to this transformation.

Having then established reformation of the FTM as a highest priority, and based on the input heard by all tonight, I withdraw this ordinance from consideration this evening to allow the ongoing effort, which began last August, to reform the budget process in a non-partisan way, as so many have expressed in different ways tonight. I urge the community to come together to take this important step for the sake of our families, especially our children, and our future. Let tonight be the beginning of that coming together. I commit to all of you my rededicated efforts to see it through.

Dave Nelson
Tiverton Town Council
President, Tiverton Citizens for Change