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Tripp: Who can you trust? A look back at the 2002 override campaign

By **Ted Tripp**/ Just thinking
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Last week, the Board of Selectmen voted to put a \$7.3 million debt exclusion override on the March 29 ballot to finance a new police station.

Since North Andover has reportedly had more overrides than any other town in the state, it is perhaps useful to review what happened in the last override election.

The initial \$10 million override recommended by the Financial Task Force was reduced to \$4 million by the then- Board of Selectmen, who thought the original amount was too high. The override was for a permanent increase in taxes with most of the new revenue directed to the school department. The \$4 million override was sought even though a \$1.9 million override, much of it for the schools, had been approved just two years earlier.

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To pass the override a group of proponents got together and formed the ballot committee Our Town, Our Future. It was led by School Committee chairman Dan Murphy; current chair of the Board of Selectmen, Rosemary Smedile; and current vice chairman of the Finance Committee -- as well as chairman of the Republican Town Committee -- Keith Mitchell. They raised and spent about \$7,000 to convince the taxpayers to dig deeper into their wallets. It didn't work. The voters overwhelmingly defeated the override at the polls by a margin of two to one.

The major focus piece of the pro-override group was a slick pamphlet mailed to many voters called "Our town, Our future" with the subtitle, "Your vote ensures your quality of life in North Andover." As you open it up, the left-hand side says, "Vote Yes for the Override" in big letters, and then on the right is a long list of what the consequences will be to town services if you vote Yes versus No. The implication is that if the override passes, the town will be able to maintain all its current and wonderful services and if it fails, the town will suffer dire cutbacks.

Let's take a look at some of the threatened reductions if the override failed.

On the school side, the brochure says an override failure would "require spending up to \$600,000 for unemployment benefits for fired teachers. Did we pay this? The quick answer is no. Not only were no teachers fired or laid off, but when the dust settled after the final town budget was passed, there was actually a small increase in the number of school positions.

Likewise, the brochure says failure would "risk losing high school Advanced Placement courses." What's happened? We have not lost any AP courses and in fact, as a result of pressure from new School Committee member Dr. Charles Ormsby, the number of students participating in AP classes has almost doubled since 2002.

The brochure also says we "jeopardize high school accreditation." The last time I checked, our schools were fully accredited and operating normally.

Failure of the override also claims to "eliminate the literacy program in the elementary schools..." When I last looked, we still have this program, albeit with its funding somewhat reduced.



The brochure also described other town services that would be minimized or eliminated.

For example, it says an override failure will "cut back town recycling program." Have you seen any cutback? In fact, more plastics than ever have been added to the recyclable list and, just recently, we all know that cardboard recycling has become mandatory.





Also, failure was predicted to "eliminate hazardous waste collection program." Really? Then what did they do with those materials I brought over to the DPW garage last spring?

The brochure also says an override defeat will "eliminate the inter-library loan program." News to me. Last summer I requested -- and received -- a book that I believe came from a library in Peabody or

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Salem. The inter-library loan program is alive and well.

Any streetlights been turned off in your neighborhood? Must have happened. The brochure says if the override fails, "...require the town to turn off some streetlights." Like everything else, it never happened.

The above examples are just typical of many more deprivations that never materialized. What were these people thinking?

Speaking of that, let's take a look at who signed on in support of these wayward predictions. The first name that jumps out is Finance Committee Chairman Jack Watkins, joining Vice Chairman Keith Mitchell in his efforts to promote the override. We also have Selectman Mark Caggiano following the lead of Rosemary Smedile, and School Committee members Al Perry and Bruce Baker joining Chairman Murphy. And there is former School Committee member and current candidate Diane Huster. We also see Chief of Police Richard Stanley and Police Station Building Committee member Sam Ameen.

Mr. Ameen, who is one of the leaders now promoting the current override, was quoted just last week in the North Andover Citizen as saying "...he hates taxes just as much as the next guy, but in some cases they are justified." If this is true, then why wasn't he on the side of the 5,438 citizens - two-thirds of the voters - who were overwhelmingly against the override in 2002? Aren't these the "next guy" he is talking about?

Finally, I have a question for readers of my column: What do all the people I mention above have in common?

By now this should be easy for you.

All these people who supported the 2002 override pamphlet, full of dire predictions that never came true, are also supporting or have voted in some manner to support or are actively promoting the current \$7.3 million override.

Just remember this when you go to the polls on March 29.

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