

**TOWN OF WILBRAHAM**  
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**BOARD OF SELECTMEN**

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September 15, 2003

Robert L. Page, Jr.  
Chairman  
Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham  
903 Stony Hill Rd.  
Wilbraham, MA 01095

Dear Bob:

The Selectmen have received and read your letter of September 11. We welcome the suggestions of the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham as we do the comments and letters we receive from any resident or town group. You can be assured that your views are "listened to and respected equally" as are all the comments and suggestions we receive.

What follows is an answer to each of the points raised in your letter. Before doing that, however, we wish to comment on the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham Statement of Principles vis-à-vis the role and responsibility the Board of Selectmen have when it comes to what programs and level of services are provided by the town through the town budget supported by the taxpayer and the processes involved.

The board, by and in itself, does not have the authority to decide exactly what programs and services are funded and the amount of tax revenue. The final decision on these are made by the voters at the annual or special Town Meetings, or when necessary through a levy limit override. Remember that the proposals made are the results of a lengthy and careful budget process that involves numerous individuals and groups (Town Administrator, department heads, Finance Committee, School Committee) done in open meetings.

When times are good there is generally widespread consensus of what should and can be done at what cost. When times are difficult there can be honest differences on these matters. The latter has been the case the past few years. During the last two years the questions of programs and services and the amount of taxes needed have been brought to the voters of the town. We believe that this was the proper course to follow and we fully accepted and respected the different decisions made by the voters in 2002 and 2003. We certainly got the message and did "live within our means." It was not our plan nor our wish to ask the resident to vote yes or no on increasing their taxes (we are taxpayers also); but it was our responsibility to let the resident of the town decide what programs and services should be provided and at what cost to them, the taxpayers.

Finally to say or imply that the "ideas, votes and positions" which "differ" from that of "the town leadership" and should "be listened to and respected equally as tax contributing members of the community" were not taken into consideration (listened to or respected) needs to be addressed. Speaking for the Board of Selectmen we were fully aware of and certainly respectful of those who both advocated for and were opposed to a tax override. Both sides had the time and opportunity to bring their views forward and be heard. Also, we believe strongly that we stand for and follow a policy of "complete governmental openness and straightforward answers regarding town spending and other civic matter." What is more open and straight forward than open meetings, town meeting and elections, which all involve public debate and input?

I also call you attention to a letter sent to the newspapers from the Board of Selectmen following the May 17 override election, which is attached.

The remainder of our response will discuss the specific issues raised in your letter. To ensure that we address each of your points, I will repeat them below and follow with discussion from our perspective.

**1. Have all town departments establish a zero-based budget and provide no more than level funding for the year 2005.**

Between the Finance Committee, Board of Selectmen and Town Administrator, every single line item in the town budget is reviewed every year. Also, Wilbraham has a budget review process that is somewhat unusual for municipalities in Massachusetts. In January of each year, four months before Annual Town Meeting, the Finance Committee and Selectmen receive from staff a comprehensive budget proposal that balances appropriations to available funds, assuming no levy limit overrides. Last year this proposal cut almost \$2.4 million in non-school municipal department requests.

This proposal serves as a starting point, and is carefully reviewed and revised by the Finance Committee and Selectmen. However, it is certainly easier to start with a budget proposal that is in balance. I believe you would be hard-pressed to find many other communities that begin with a balanced budget scenario that early in the process.

Therefore, placing a restriction on department directors to submit budgets with no more than level funding is not necessary in Wilbraham. We also think it would be unwise. Many of our most important public services revolve around public safety. Property loss, personal injury and even death can result if we do not do an appropriate job. While we discourage department directors from submitting "wish lists," we want them to raise important safety and service delivery concerns, even if they are pessimistic over the likelihood of funding. Even without a strict "level funding" dictate, we already find that staff are reluctant to bring forward some issues due to funding concerns. We do not want to find out after an unfortunate incident that staff knew about a potential problem, but did not raise it during the budget process because they were told they could not even think of going above level funding.

You specifically proposed the use of zero-base budgeting. This is a formal budgeting approach that was developed in the 1970's and attempted at the federal level during the Carter Administration. In his book Modern Public Finance Bernard Herber offered the following critique (p. 3 14), which seemed to reflect

the general opinion of experts who studied efforts to implement this process:

Robert L. Page, Jr.

September 15, 2003

Page Three

This instrument, known as zero-base budgeting, starts from the premise that an agency ~ budget base contains no programs or funding. Thus, theoretically, every agency program and program component should be evaluated vis-à-vis the agency's other programs, as well as programs of other agencies, before being placed in the budget. Such an undertaking, of course, would be enormous. Hence, except for providing a general framework that requires all programs to be justified in some manner, zero-based budgeting does not appear to be able to accomplish its nonetheless meritorious objectives. Moreover, zero-base budgeting would require specific criteria for evaluating and comparing alternative programs. Thus, it would ultimately fall back on such established fiscal instruments as benefit-cost analysis.

We believe the detailed, common-sense review that our elected officials, volunteers and staff give to each year's budget proposals year after year has served the community well. A concrete example may help to illustrate this point.

Several years ago Selectmen joined you in supporting efforts to maintain fixed route bus service in Wilbraham by the Pioneer Valley Transit Authority (PVTa), even though there was a limited ridership base in town and continued service required higher local and state subsidies in the future. If our overriding goal had been to maintain level funding for our PVTa assessment, or if we had applied formal zero base budgeting analysis to this issue, the board's position might have been quite different.

**2. Have selectmen take the initiative to conference with all town boards and committees and the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District committee in order to contain costs and spending through 2005. Considering consolidation of agency functions could provide an alternative through outsourcing specialists on a bid basis.**

It is good to know that your organization supports our long-standing efforts. In fact, as the economy has worsened, these "conferences" have become more frequent and intense. We have monthly department head meetings and monthly financial staff meetings, and cooperation between departments is quite good.

We explore the market to determine the best deals for electricity and natural gas, and have looked at a number of options, including outsourcing, for providing grounds and athletic field maintenance, information technology services, custodial services, supply purchases and professional consulting services. We use high school and college interns and volunteers when possible, and will implement a program that provides property tax relief for senior citizens providing service to the town. We also provide opportunities to individuals who must complete court-ordered public service, and have used inmate labor when appropriate. We have worked with groups outside of town government to provide facilities and services to the community that do not require support from tax dollars. These include:

- \* The Wilbraham Nature & Cultural Center for operation of Fountain Park
- \* The Country Club of Wilbraham for expansion and operation of the town's golf course.
- \* The Soccer Club of Wilbraham for construction of athletic fields.

- \* The Atheneum Society for operation of the Old Meeting House.
- \* The Children's Museum for recreational activities for young children.
- \* The YMCA for recreational facilities and programs for all ages.

Robert L. Page, Jr.  
September 15, 2003  
Page Four

We have worked hard to provide as many services as possible outside of property tax base. To date, water, wastewater, solid waste disposal, ambulance and public access television are all self-supporting operations that do not rely on subsidy from property taxes.

We have had and will continue a close working relationship with the Hampden-Wilbraham Regional School District. Anyone involved in those meetings during the past few years will tell you that they were held often and involved candid discussions of budget issues.

From your letter, I assume members of your group have specific suggestions, which we always welcome. Please do not be bashful about bringing them forward.

**3. Freeze all personnel contracts at current levels and suspend contract negotiations through the end of 2005. Our members suggest performance-based pay increases should be considered for the future.**

We have three organized bargaining units and a group of management employees who do not belong to a union. Only one union had a ratified contract providing raises in FY 2004, and we have honored that contract with funding appropriated at Annual Town Meeting. No other employees received raises in FY 2004.

We are currently in negotiations with two bargaining units whose contracts expired last July 1. We have a legal obligation to bargain in good faith and will not suspend those negotiations. It would not be appropriate to discuss our negotiating strategy in this letter. However, it is a matter of public record that we did not request funding from Town Meeting for any employee pay raises other than employees in the one union that had a contract running through FY 2004.

Performance-based pay increases have been in place for 12 years for management staff and members of the municipal employees union. Over the years we have attempted to include performance-based pay in the contracts of our other two unions.

**4. All town departments should develop contingency planning processes to prepare for future shortfalls.**

We have monthly financial staff meetings and a formal mid-year budget review for this very purpose. In recent years, contingency planning for revenue shortfalls has become a standard operating procedure. Frankly, I have been impressed by how quickly our departments have been able to react to sudden losses of state aid.

**5. Continue the present town-wide hiring freeze through 2005, except for essential services.**

We appreciate knowing your support for the hiring freeze, which has been in place since January of 2002 and remains in force.

**6. No new taxes, charges or fees should be enacted or requested in the foreseeable future, except for annual 2-1/2 percent increase as provided in Proposition 2-1/2.**

Robert L. Page, Jr.  
September 15, 2003  
Page Five

We are very reluctant to increase any tax or lee, but decline to take this pledge that there will be no increases above those allowed under Proposition 2-1/2. We do not know what is going to happen to state aid to the town or regional school district and we cannot promise that there would he no circumstances under which we would consider a levy limit override.

We also decline to take the pledge regarding fines and fees for several reasons. We operate three enterprise funds (water, waste water and solid waste disposal) that are self-supporting based on user fee income. All three must meet expenses that are dictated by market forces over which we have limited control. Water (governed by an elected Water Commission) and wastewater costs arc also impacted by weather conditions over which we have no control. To take the "no increase" pledge for these funds would run the risk of undermining the quality of these essential services or turning to a subsidy from the property tax base.

Many of our other fees are charged to profit-making businesses to cover the cost the public incurs due to their activities. Examples of cost to the public would include inspections to ensure sanitary conditions and safety, and repairs to public ways as a result of curb cuts. We are constantly reviewing our fee schedules. If we find instances where our fees are well below the levels charged in neighboring communities and arc not covering the public cost of business activities, why should we be reluctant to raise those fees?

I hope I have been able to address your concerns on each issue. Speaking for the full Board of Selectmen, we welcome the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham as a positive force in our town and we look forward to your participation in our open form of town government.

Sincerely,

David W. Barry  
Chairman  
Board of Selectmen

Enclosure: Open Letter

DWB:wjf