

Who are the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham?

By Robert L. Page, Jr.

Sunday morning, May 18th 2003 as I sat reading the newspaper I learned that the proponents of the override in Wilbraham won by a very narrow margin. 61 votes out of a total of 4,789 cast on the issue. It was surprising in light of the fact in the previous year a similar override failed to pass by 2 to 1. I remember thinking to myself: "If more of the townsfolk had been more informed about the override and what the money was to be used for, the outcome might have been different". Certainly the Wilbrahamites who were for the override were well organized, well funded and had people and posters on every major town intersection. The folks who voted **NO** had no organization, no signs, and no advertisements. Just a few letters to the editors of the 3 local papers.

A few of us decided to have a meeting and talk about whether it would be worth while to organize a group that was positive in nature and informed.. We decided that our motto was to be "living within our means." . We wrote a statement of principles that explained what we stood for and what we were trying to do. Here they are:

Statement of Principles

1.

We, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, ask that our town officials, in the pursuit of their duties and responsibilities, commit to live within our means.

2.

We, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, ask that while our ideas, votes and positions may differ from the town leadership, that we be listened to and respected equally as tax contributing members of our community.

3.

We, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, pledge to take a more active role in our community. Attending more meetings, asking more questions and voting in larger numbers.

4.

We, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, stand for complete governmental openness and straightforward answers from our towns elected and appointed officials, regarding town spending and other civic matters.

5.

We, the Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, pledge to serve as a watchdog on local government spending and to encourage fiscal responsibility.

We held our first public meeting in July of 2003 and had a nice attendance of about 70 town members and a great deal of interest was shown. Among members who joined our fledgling group were 3 ex selectmen, an ex school superintendent and various members of other town boards and committees. We decided that we needed to learn more about our town's affairs and so we established 4 committees: Membership, Selectman, School and Finance. They would attend all town meetings. Each committee was composed of a team leader and 3 or 4 other members. We determined that Each group leader would make a brief report to our monthly meetings and that way we would all be able to keep thoroughly up to date with what was going on in our town.

Phase I went smoothly. We were all becoming more active in our town government and more

knowledgeable. Our membership was now over a 100 and growing steadily. We solicited voluntary contributions to pay for postage and supplies. We wrote a charter. We established a checking account. Registered as a Political Action Group with the state. For our January meeting we will be sending out our first newsletter. In short, we accomplished all the basics.

We are ready to move into Phase II. Phase II will be a more pro-active phase for our organization. Asking questions, Doing research in areas of concern. Trying to communicate with the town that we are not “anti-school” and do all that we can to try to promote the concept of living within our means. We feel that Proposition 2 1/2 overrides are a useful municipal tool as debt exclusions, not as a supplement to our town’s operating expenses. After all, we as individuals must live within our means, why not the town.

It seems that we are having some effect. Words like zero-based budgeting, doing everything we can to avoid another override and living within our means seem to be uttered more and more by our town leadership. There has been some vilification of us as a group of budget slashers, these things are not true. We believe that the education of our children is a social obligation that must be met. That obligation stands without regard for the age of the average Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham member.

My Wife and I moved to Wilbraham with our children about 30 years ago because of the reputation of its schools. Young people with school age children are still moving to Wilbraham for the same reason. Just ask these new residents. We have wonderful schools. They are excellent because we have parents and teachers who care about and work for our children’s education. The children work hard because of the values they have learned at home. There have been complaints that we are in the bottom 1/3 of the state for per pupil spending however our students are in the top 1/3 in academic achievement. The excellence of our schools has nothing to do with how much money we spend on them.

We, Concerned Citizens of Wilbraham, believe what we said in our 3rd principle. We pledge to take a more active role in our community. Attending more meetings, asking more questions and voting in larger numbers. We feel that this attitude is virtuous. We ask that all of you who read this article to join us in becoming more active in our towns government. Don’t just sit in front of the television and complain about it. Join us and help us all to become better citizens. Our next meeting is January 6th, 2004 at 7:30 P.M. at the Minnechaug Regional High School auditorium. All of you are welcome. For additional information call 596-8719.