



## Once Upon an Override Campaign

Robin Schoenthaler, MD

Once I heard the word “override,” I jumped into local politics and never looked back. Control of the tax rate by the people! It seemed so revolutionary. It turned out it is indeed revolutionary -- in a within-the-lines, legislated kind of way -- and we did change the tax base in Arlington, and I’m proud of that. But what was really revolutionary was how override campaigns changed the fabric of my social life and friendships in Arlington.

I come from California, where Proposition 13 has decimated the state I loved. It limits the property tax to a 2% hike per year (less than inflation) which has contributed to many downward trends in California.

Growing up, my siblings and I went to great public schools and world-famous universities. We swam at fabulous pools with three kinds of diving boards and went to big sprawling public libraries anytime we wanted. Proposition 13 so radically reduced the amount of property taxes available for these institutions that now the schools are lousy (48th in the country in most measures), many libraries are shuttered, and the pools have caved in on themselves.

Nowadays I’m watching my nieces and nephews grow up never having a hot meal at school (no cafeterias!), having to pay for five years of college because there aren’t enough classes to finish in four, and never seeing the inside of a library. And there was almost nothing they could do about it -- Proposition 13 required a two-thirds vote to change the local tax rate, and almost nobody could pull that off.

But in Massachusetts, which had a similar “Proposition 2 ½,” limiting tax increases to 2.5%, you “only” need a simple majority (51%) to vote to increase that

amount. Hence, when towns find their state aid isn’t enough to pay for the rising cost of services, sometimes they have an override vote, so the populace can vote themselves on whether to raise their own taxes beyond the 2½% allowed by law.

It takes a TON of work -- nobody wants to pay higher taxes, and the campaigns involve a lot of education and grass-roots work. I learned this because the first Arlington campaign I was involved in -- in 2003 -- ended up defeated, a bruising awful experience. Two days after the override was rejected, over 50 school employees, including our favorite librarians and reading teachers, were let go. Almost none of them ever returned. I will never forget the ashen faces of those dozens of town employees about to lose their jobs.

You learn a lot about people in a defeat, and a number of the volunteers on the 2003 override and its aftermath became my closest friends. For the next override campaign -- in 2005 -- it was no trouble to get those friends to volunteer as override workers again. We also got dozens of new people to help spread the word about how an override would improve our budget situation. We worked hard and we passed the override and it added an invaluable \$6 million to our strained budget. And thank heavens, because then 2008 happened and budgets got even tighter.

So in 2011, after town leaders developed a five-year plan and unanimously endorsed an override proposition, we again tapped on hundreds of volunteers to work on the campaign. We had many new volunteers, especially from East Arlington, and I got to know a whole new group of friends and acquaintances. The campaign passed again, and added \$6.5 million dollars to the tax base and prevented the devastating

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layoffs we'd seen in 2003.

And again, the impact was personal as well as political. The people I met in that campaign have turned out to be some of the nicest, most wonderful people I've ever met. Some have joined my church, some I've worked with in other ventures, some have been very kind to my family in times of trouble, and some have hired my children for part-time jobs. And I never would have met any of them if it hadn't been for being involved in override campaigns.

When people move to new towns they sometimes ask me, "How can I get to know my new community?" I now have a ready answer: get involved in local politics! You'll get to make a difference, you'll get to learn new skills and talents, and if you're lucky like me and live in a great town, you may well get to make a whole bunch of new friends