

TIVERTON HEADLINES

Posted: *Tuesday, September 16, 2008 11:55 AM EDT*

Tiverton citizens group draws big crowd

By Marcia Pobzeznik
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An overflow crowd turned out at the VFW hall on Monday night to listen to a newly formed group that is fed up with tax increases in Tiverton and hopes to change town government by voting for like-minded candidates in November.

The political action committee, Tiverton Citizens for Change, asked the more than 200 people who showed up at the meeting to join the organization.

“We can drive change but we need your help to do it,” said David Nelson, president of the group that was formed this summer.

Members of the group had voted at the financial town meeting in May to reject a proposed budget that would have exceeded the state’s cap on tax-levy increases, but that vote was overturned when the meeting was reconvened later that month.

Only 175 people were allowed inside the hall Monday night, in accordance with the fire code, leaving more than 30 standing outside. They were allowed in after the initial meeting ended. Nelson repeated his talk for them.

Residents also heard from representatives of taxpayer groups in neighboring towns.

“We have become a force in town,” Robert Hayden of the Little Compton Taxpayers’ Association told the crowd. He said the group several years ago demanded at town meeting that the budget be reworked and rejected a proposed 17 percent tax increase. Members got what they wanted.

There is power in numbers, said Larry Fitzmorris, president of Portsmouth Concerned Citizens.

“As an individual you go to town government and you really don’t have a voice,” he said. “Together you have a voice. If you decide to make changes in Tiverton, you can.”

Many of the problems cities and towns face need to be changed at the state level, said Harry Staley, a member of the 4,000-member Rhode Island Statewide Coalition.

“There may be a day when they have to listen to you and me and do things differently,” Staley said of state government. “You can change this town, believe me. There’s no one else that can do it.”

One resident in the crowd asked Nelson how they could push for changes in the way contracts are negotiated. Public employees who pay

nothing for health-care insurance need to begin paying something, Nelson said, and those who do contribute need to pay more. "And stop the nonsense of people being able to retire after 20 years," he said.

"We're going to be addressing just those types of issues," Nelson said.

Resident Robert Martin, who also is the town's maintenance man, asked members how they planned to cut the budget in light of a state law that requires school budgets to remain level or increase every year. Any cuts, Martin told them, would have to come from the municipal side of government.

"We recognize that people need services," Tiverton Citizens for Change member Mel Platte said. "We're going to test their state mandates. We've got a school administration out of control and the rest of the town is paying for it."

Town Administrator James Goncalo, who was at the meeting along with several Town Council members, said he wasn't surprised at the turnout. "Taxes are an issue," he said, "but before you can attack it you have to understand it."

This year's tax-rate increase of 99 cents per \$1,000 of property value was driven by school bond debt and revenue losses.

"The Town Council only has control over a small portion of the budget, just 30 percent of the budget," Goncalo said. "They don't have control over debt service because that's approved by taxpayer votes."

The town budget is \$42 million and \$13 million of that is for the municipal government that funds police, fire, highway and Town Hall functions.

Cuts can be made, said Jeff Caron, vice chairman of the Budget Committee, who noted that the town does need to tighten its financial belt.

"Last year when there was a revenue shortfall, they ran to the state for a waiver," Caron said. Towns should operate like households have to when there is less revenue, he said. "What do you do? Tighten your belt."

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