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## Liesener: Failed 'man on the street' shows deeper issues

By **Katie Liesener**/ Reporter's Notebook  
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On this past bright spring Tuesday morning, my editor sent me out on the most dreaded of assignments - to accost the average Waylander and secure his name, photograph and opinion on the override.

Flip forward and backward through this paper. You will not find a man-on-the-street section in these pages.

I stood outside the front doors of Town Building for an awkward hour, with camera and notebook in hand, trying to catch residents on necessary civic business. I must have screamed solicitor, which I discovered is one rung above reporter.

Though the people I met were unanimously loath to have their faces in the paper - "I haven't washed my hair today," said one man - most were eager to talk about their town.

Of the many people I met coming and going that morning, just two agreed to give me an on-the-record opinion on the override.

One was a woman in favor of the override, who explained apologetically that she was also a teacher in the school system.

The other was a middle-aged man holding the hand of a red-headed boy, bare-kneed and a third his size. The man could think of several reasons why he did not like the override - the sum of money, for example, and the fact that it's permanent. But the reason he was ultimately for it, he said, was the reason holding his hand. He wanted his 5-year-old son to have a good education.

I had correctly guessed that both would be in favor of the override, based on the stereotype that parents with school-age children are for the override, older residents are against.

For better or worse, in Wayland, a child is interpreted as a pro-override badge. And white hair, the banner of a naysayer.

That morning, I spoke to three very friendly older people, each of whom was against the override.

One elderly couple formed a semi-circle around me, eager to express their frustration with the recent series of tax hikes. They didn't want their names in the paper, but with a knowing grin and a hand on my arm, the man said, "Dissatisfied customers, you can say that. Dissatisfied customers, that's what we are."

An older woman in a sun hat and wide sunglasses, concerned to find me still standing at the door on her way out, broke my lone watch with a little conversation. She had lived in Wayland 45 years, she said, long enough to see a cow pasture replaced by a 20-plus room mansion. The changes were coming quicker and quicker, and she feared they might drive residents like her away.

After a good half hour standing before Town Building, I felt I was having a similar effect. I still had not found anyone willing to both give an opinion and be photographed. Some of the people I stopped weren't even residents.

A man in a green work shirt approached the door. Resident? No, born in Wayland and moved away years ago, where the home prices were reasonable, he said.

"Blue collar people think clearly," he said, laughing, walking lightly toward his pickup.

An older man in a motorized scooter came out of the building. Resident? No, he used to be until he left a few years ago, not because of taxes, but to take care of his ailing mother.

An Asian man with wispy hair walked toward me. Resident?

"Yes."

Then he thought about it.

"Well, no."

I had expected to get a "maybe" on the override question, but not on residency.

He was a resident, he explained, but not a citizen. He didn't follow override developments because he was not able to vote. I mentioned an article I had seen in the warrant that, if passed, would petition the state Legislature to create a law that would allow non-citizens to vote in local elections.

"Really?" he said, surprised. He asked if I would let him know what happens. I said I would, feeling

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here was someone who might be eager to have his picture taken as a Wayland voter if given the chance.

Of course, I could not blame the others. Though everyone I met was very friendly to me - even the man who threw up his hands with a frantic smile, shouting over his shoulder, "No time!" - the politics in town have a distinctly bitter tone which I have seen myself in board and committee meetings.

When health care, pension and utility costs tighten the financial screws, and something has to give, I can imagine it's hard to be calm. So much is at stake. The question is not one of \$2.1 million. It is: Who does Wayland belong to? Can it belong equally to a little boy and a longtime resident?

Standing at Town Building, where everyone is civil and the trees are still in bloom, it seems much simpler. The building itself is flanked by a veterans' memorial to honor the sacrifices of older residents, and a playground to invigorate the newest.






But in a budget, will one group have to be prioritized over the other?

That question is difficult enough for a resident, but especially when the arguments get nasty.

A brown-haired middle-aged woman I met helpfully suggested I might have better luck outside a grocery store. She said she was sorry she wouldn't be able to help me herself.

"I've been yanked, pulled and pushed," she said. "I have no opinion."

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