



Shock to the system

Voters pony up taxes after the state flunks Randolph's schools

BY ROBERT PREER

RANDOLPH During the 27 years after Proposition 2½ became law in Massachusetts, the town of Randolph never passed an override of the state property tax cap. Between 2003 and 2007, voters rejected overrides three times. So when this year's election was held on April 1 and the votes were tallied that night at Town Hall, override supporters reacted to the results with celebration and amazement.

Randolph voters passed one of the largest overrides in Massachusetts history: \$5.5 million for the schools, \$411,000 for the police, and \$200,000 for the fire department. When property tax bills are mailed in July, homeowners will absorb a 16 percent annual increase, or about \$500 for a typical home—a big hike in any community during a recession, but especially difficult in a middle-income town like Randolph.

The new revenue will allow the town to hire 50 teachers, six police officers, and four firefighters. Schools will be able to expand their curricula and restore programs that had been cut over the past five years. “It allows us to restore some critical educational infrastructure needs that have been lost,” says Randolph School Superintendent Richard Silverman.

The election appeared to pull Randolph from the brink of civic collapse, but the town's recent history could be a cautionary tale for other suburbs in Massachusetts. In the months leading up to this spring's override vote, the town had fallen into a dangerous downward spiral, and the state was preparing to take over what it labeled an “underperforming” school system.

Randolph may be less affluent and more racially diverse than other towns in the Boston area, but its troubles reveal that the divide between suburb and city is not as great as many people think.

Randolph's experience also shows what can happen when a town appears to turn its back on its schools.

RANDOLPH, A FORMER shoe-manufacturing town that is now mostly a bedroom community for Boston, first began to feel budgetary pressures in 2001. That's when the state economy went into a tailspin, state spending was curtailed, and local tax revenues began to drop. Randolph, of course, was not alone in this predicament, but it was hit particularly hard.

And to say that 2007 was a tough year for Randolph understates the perilous turn the town's fortunes had taken. “It was like you were in a boat and you were taking on water, and you couldn't bail yourself out quick enough,” says Selectman James Burgess. “Pretty soon the boat was going to sink.”

The first bad news came at the start of the year, when the state Board of Library Commissioners revoked the accreditation of the town's library. The action, triggered by cutbacks in library hours below state minimums, deprived the town of \$30,000 in state library aid and also prompted neighboring towns to yank borrowing privileges for Randolph residents.

In March, voters shot down a \$4.16 million tax override, \$3 million of which would have gone to the troubled schools. In the weeks after the vote, the School Committee voted to lay off teachers, eliminate all bus transportation, close an elementary school, and end all freshman and junior varsity sports at Randolph High.

In May, two boys were killed in their home on Union Street in a fire, which authorities suspect was caused by arson. When the fire chief said publicly that budget cuts were a factor in the deaths, the

selectmen suspended him for three weeks. He later responded with a federal lawsuit.

Summer brought new pressure on the police, especially with the shooting death of a 17-year-old in front of a gas station on North Main Street, or Route 28, the heavily traveled main road into town. Authorities attributed the killing to gangs, which also were suspected of playing a role in a nonfatal stabbing a week earlier.

In mid-August, the selectmen shifted their top administrator, Executive Secretary Michael Carroll, to the job of finance director and cut his pay. They attempted to make the elected town clerk, Brian Howard, interim executive secretary, but ran into protests and a lawsuit from a group of residents. Carroll resigned and took a town job in Seekonk, and the selectmen left the executive secretary post vacant.

Such turmoil seemed to spread throughout local government. The recreation director was fired after 33 years on the job. Attempts to hire a town planner—Randolph is one of the largest towns in the state not to have a professional planner—foundered when none of the finalists would take the position, apparently because the \$75,000 salary was below their other options.

Then in October, Maureen Kenney, who

PERHAPS THE WORST news came in November, when the state Board of Education cited Randolph as an “underperforming” school district, based on declining test scores and inadequate funding. (Gill-Montague, Holyoke, and Southbridge share that designation.) It gave the district six months to develop a turnaround plan or face state receivership. Since the state education reform law was adopted in 1993, no school district has gone into receivership.

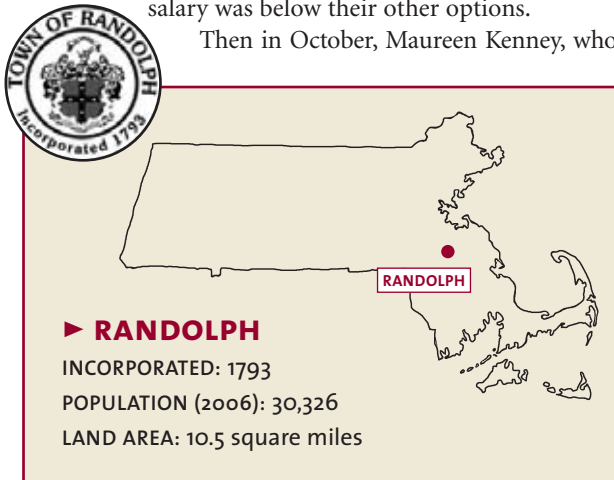
The town’s school spending grew by only 6.6 percent between fiscal years 2002 and 2006, well below the statewide average of 27.7 percent, and Randolph has been hit hard by fluctuations in state aid. Because it has high numbers of low-income, minority, and non-English-speaking students, the town has been eligible for more state aid than most suburban districts get. (State aid makes up close to 40 percent of Randolph’s school budget, compared with 13 percent in the neighboring town of Canton.) But funding from Beacon Hill fell by about \$1 million between the 2003 and 2004 fiscal years, and it has remained flat ever since.

It hasn’t helped that, according to data compiled by the Randolph schools, local parents and students began deserting the public schools around 2003. Since then, enrollment has fallen 20 percent. According to the department, 30 percent of school age children in Randolph do not attend the public schools, up significantly from 21 percent five years ago. Among high school age children, approximately 40 percent, or 600 students, don’t go to Randolph High.

This may be a simple case of white flight. Partly because of relatively relaxed zoning laws, Randolph is known for small, affordable homes, and beginning in the 1970s it has become increasingly diverse, with an influx of African-Americans, Asians, Haitians, and other ethnic and racial minorities. As these ethnic groups took seats in the public schools, white parents in growing numbers pulled their children out, sending them to private, parochial, and charter schools.

The 2000 federal census found the town’s population to be 63 percent white, 21 percent black, 10 percent Asian, and 3 percent Hispanic. By contrast, the racial makeup of the Randolph public schools during the 2006-2007 school year was 50 percent African-American, 26 percent white, 15 percent Asian, and 7 percent Hispanic.

The Randolph schools also have a seen a big jump in students from low income families and families where English is not the language spoken in the home. According to the state Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, English is not the primary language of 38 percent of the students (the statewide average is 15 percent) and 41 percent of the students are classified as low-income (the statewide average is 29 percent).



served on both the school committee and board of selectmen, confronted School Superintendent Silverman about his request for five days paid leave after the death of a relative. He quoted her as saying of his request, “It’s not the standard in industry. Besides, don’t you Jews plant them within 24 hours?”

The remarks set off a furor that spread beyond the town, drawing unwelcome publicity to the community. Kenney apologized and resigned her school committee post, but a recall campaign to remove her from the board of selectmen failed to garner enough signatures.

Burgess, the selectman, says 2007 was a devastating year for Randolph. “I’ve been in government half of my life,” he says. “I’ve never seen the animosity or chaos that this year brought.”

It was the school district's poor performance on standardized tests that caught the attention of state education officials. Examining student achievement measures from 2003 to 2006, state education analysts determined Randolph to be a low performing district.

In the 2006 MCAS tests, only 46 percent of Randolph students were proficient in English and 29 percent were proficient in math. Furthermore, the trends were pointing downward. The percentage of students scoring as advanced or proficient on MCAS tests decreased by 8 points between 2003 and 2006, while those in the warning/failing category increased by 4 points. And Randolph

Poor test scores and inadequate funding led to the 'underperforming' label.

seemed to be having a harder time with those who were making up an increasing proportion of the student population—African-Americans, Hispanics, children with disabilities, and children from low income and non-English speaking families. Less than a third of the students in these groups were proficient in MCAS testing. These poor scores, along with the troubled town management, made the Board of Education's "underperforming" label seem almost inevitable.

RANDOLPH IS STILL governed by a 240-member representative Town Meeting, which meets a couple of times a year, a volunteer board of selectmen, and several autonomous boards and committees. The chief administrator in town is the selectmen's executive secretary, who has no real authority over some of the boards. This lack of centralized authority has hurt the town's finances and allowed conflicts to occasionally spin out of control, according to some officials.

"We are a \$75 million business being run in essence by volunteers," says Town Clerk Howard.

A former selectman, Howard remembers when Gov. Mitt Romney cut state aid in the middle of the fiscal year early in his administration, and most communities pulled back on spending immediately. In Randolph, officials had to wait for Town Meeting to convene six months later, Howard says. An attempt to shift to a city-style mayor-council form of government lost at the polls in 2005, though proponents hope to put government reform to the voters again.

Still, there were signs this spring that the town's troubled politics are calming. The selectmen finally hired an executive secretary, David Murphy, who had been opera-

tions manager for Quincy's former mayor William Phelan. A fresh face in town, Murphy promised to focus on efficiency and cost savings, which won him early plaudits from elected officials. And the school committee decided after some hesitation to renew Silverman's contract as superintendent for three years, providing stability to the schools.

The selectmen and school committee, which had squabbled for years over matters large and small, decided to seek better relations. In April, members of the two boards met at Town Hall for a luncheon with a facilitator on hand. The officials agreed to make the luncheons a regular occasion.

"We came out of there with a consensus that we need to work together," says school committee member Marybeth Nearen.

Sen. Brian Joyce of Milton, whose district includes Randolph, launched a series of initiatives aimed at helping the town. In the middle of last year, the town found money to keep the library open more hours but needed the state to waive a two-year waiting period for recertification. Joyce shepherded through the Legislature a bill to allow quicker recertification.

Joyce also persuaded the state Office of Public Safety to open a regional police training facility in a closed Randolph school, which will bring revenue to the town from the lease and also have dozens of police cars rolling in and out of town every day and perhaps deterring wrongdoers. Joyce also helped to arrange a Department of Revenue review of town finances, as well as a \$1.8 million grant to spruce up the downtown.

"I simply felt an obligation to step in and get more involved even in areas that traditionally a state senator does not get involved in," says Joyce. "Randolph is a community at the crossroads."

The state Board of Education still has receivership for Randolph on its agenda for June. Randolph officials say they are confident with the new money voted by the town and plans in place to reinstate programs and hire new staff that they can convince the board not to take this drastic action.

J.C. Considine, state Education Department spokesman, said the board will review Randolph's plans carefully. Of the override vote, he says, "It's obviously encouraging. I know a lot of hard work and effort went into approving the override."

Silverman says the override vote "is simply the beginning." As programs are added and teachers hired, he believes the Randolph schools will again be a draw for parents and students. "We hope as we begin to rebuild, the children will come back," he says. **CW**