

Transcript of First Speech by Robert Wechsler Speech at Annual Town Meeting  
September 25, 2007

Here I am again - but with no motions this time.

How many people here realize that in the last fiscal year –the year we’re voting on this evening, 2006-2007 – the Town Meeting voted to pay \$137,000 more for full-time police salaries than town officials actually allowed to be spent?

The year before, it was \$270,000.

The overestimating of police salaries, which everyone thinks is money well spent, was used to offset 3 budget transfers in the Police Department over \$20,000, totaling \$125,000. It’s not the Police Department that is to blame. In fact, the Chief would have liked to give us the extra manpower we voted for him.

Today, we are here to approve, or not approve, budget transfers over \$20,000, but we’re not here to approve those budget transfers in the Police Department, because according to state and local law, the Town Meeting does not have to vote on transfers within a department. They could, but they don’t have to by law, and we never get at the Town Meeting to vote on anything we don’t have to vote on.

You’d think that people in town who run our finances would be content with playing around with our tax dollars in this manner, that is, it gives them a lot of leeway. There’s a lot of money within the departments to move around. But that isn’t enough for them.

So we have to look at the law. What does the law say? It says that the Town Meeting is supposed to approve budget transfers over \$20,000 **BEFORE** they need to be made. Why? Because it’s not really about approving “transfers,” this sounds very harmless. “Closing the books” is the way it’s often put. Sounds very harmless, you just have to “close the books.” That’s not what the law says. The law is about the overspending of tax dollars beyond the budget the North Haven voters approved. We approve numbers, we approve things, and when those areas are overspent, the Town Meeting has to, by state law, has to be approached and we have to approve it or it cannot be spent.

They don't say, You come back six months later and approve it when it's too late, it's already spent, and they're just closing the books. It's not how it reads in the state law.

What we have basically is the majority on the Board of Selectmen and the Board of Finance, despite protests in the past from Democrats, had waited months, year in and year out, until the money is spent.

There are exceptions in the law, it's not just everything. There's one exception for necessary repairs to highways and bridges, but only for very small emergency repairs. Why would there be an exception for these little repairs if they had to only be approved at the end of the year? It's because they're approved at the time before they're spent. But if there's an emergency repair, that has to go through, you can't wait for a Town Meeting.

There's also an exception for one additional appropriation per department, which can be made by the Board of Finance without Town Meeting approval. That gives them also a lot of leeway. But if you just look at something like Streets and Roads, which is a department just for budget purposes, you see that back in March, the department was already \$125,000 over budget, I mean in February (and then in March it went another \$83,000). So I'm sure there was some point in there – January or December – where the Board of Finance could have approved it without Town Meeting approval. But way back in February or March, they had to come to us, and they didn't do it.

In addition to the budget transfers you're being asked to approve, there's also another \$1 million in large budget transfers being taken out of the Contingent Fund. The Contingent Fund. Contingent Fund is for contingencies, for emergencies, for special needs. It's not just to cover things that happen to be spent. The language in the law is not very good, but it's pretty clear that that is one of the places where if you take money out of the Contingent Fund, the Town Meeting approves it.

And if there's any doubt, why wouldn't you come to the Town Meeting for their approval anyway? There'd be no harm to anyone, there's no bother, we're already here. But there's a \$1 million in transfers over \$20,000 that you're not being asked to approve. You should know about that. That isn't something they told you. It wasn't in the newspapers, it wasn't in the call for this meeting.

Year after year, it's the same underestimated budget items that lead to these budget transfers. Of course, you can't be on target every year, but year after year, over half the items that were taken out of the Contingent Fund had been underestimated by over \$20,000 3 of the last 4 years, and over half of the ones we're supposed to approve today have been underestimated for every single one of the last 4 years by more than \$20,000. This isn't just, We can't be perfect. This is year in year out the same thing.

The town, I must say, did start to recognize that this year, as Mr. Kopetz said. And they did get rid of some of those. But they didn't get rid of a lot of them. That is, they actually gave realistic numbers, that's what we were asking for, realistic numbers.

6 of the items relating to transfers that we're supposed to approve today (totaling \$248,000 in transfers) were not changed after the first budget. And with the ones from the Contingent Fund, it was \$500,000 worth of transfers that were not changed.

The same numbers are in the budget for next year, and they're going to come back and ask for transfers. And if we don't do anything, they're going to wait until long afterwards and we're not going to get to use the rights given to us by state law, that is, rights of the Town Meeting.

So I'm asking you to vote against the budget transfers. If we vote them down just once, the government will have to come back. They'll have to let us approve the Contingent Fund transfers, one million extra dollars, and next year they'll have to follow the law and let us approve them when state law says were supposed to approve them.

If we do just go along and vote for them, as we do year in and year out, we're going to approve breaking the law, we're going to rubber stamp the results of fiscal mismanagement year in and year out the same things, the same budget transfers need to be made because the same underestimations are done, and the same overestimations, in some other cases, like police salaries. And basically we give up the power given to us by the State Legislature for many many years. This is an old law, the only things that have been changed are the numbers, like the increase to \$20,000.

So it's our choice: do we follow the law, do we tell the people who run the town to follow the law, or do we vote to break the law. Then we are all responsible, every single person is responsible for breaking the law if we vote for this motion.