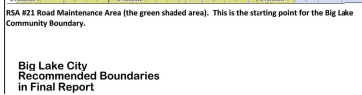


This short retrospective imperfectly captures the highlights of that experience and how best to lose an Initiative Ballot election.



Big Lake's main feature, as its name suggests, is the biggest lake in the Matanuska-Sustina Valley and Borough of the same name. Where Alaskan's may lack imagination, our conventional descriptive powers are pretty refined. Big Lake has about

This is a 'town' with a track down the middle divided by social, economic, and educational constellations. One group, ('Lake-siders') generally speaking, live around the edges of the community's many lakes. The second, larger group ('Hinter-landers'), lives most everywhere else, many, off the beaten path on unmarked dirt or gravel roads.

The 'Lake-siders,' come to Big Lake from Anchorage, or other sociable communities, to enjoy time on the lakes (summer and winter) and get away from the hustle and bustle of their daily, busy, successful lives. They bought cabins on the water and over the years have rebuilt them into large, beautiful, expensive, lakeside retreat homes. Many of them have now retired to these homes for their summer activities and fly south for the winter's more tranquil climates to their third homes, timeshares or condos in Arizona, Florida, Hawaii or Mexico. The Lake-siders represent a more affluent yet smaller segment of the community and believed the best way to protect the character of Big Lake, as it evolves and grows, was to empower the residents to better influence local decisions.

The 'Hinter-landers,' also came to Big Lake to get away from the hustle and bustle of city life. Some came to escape the rules and regulations of the encroaching 'civilization' of city living. Many others for the less expensive land and absence of zoning laws. Quite a few eke out a living through part-time employment or public assistance programs. Most of them like Big Lake's gravel roads and lack of stores, law enforcement, and scrutiny. Many Hinter-landers also wish to protect the character of Big Lake by discouraging the encroaching influences of municipal constraints.

Except for those that could afford the lakefront home but not the secondary homes down south, the Lake-siders and Hinter-landers rarely socialize or mingle. There are two exceptions. First is Floaters, the only local watering hole where one can get a drink, a smile, live music, and good cheer. The owner expertly navigates local social tabus and landmines to offer neutral ground so that all in the community have a place to relax and enjoy each others company. Many an issue can be discussed or relationships built where drink, music, and dance serves as the elixir to bring people together.

The other place where the common interest was served was at the Big Lake Community Council. The Board of Directors was principally comprised of 'Lake-siders.' The Council was their chosen venue to improve the lives of the residents by trying to build a better community for their neighbors and children, and protect their investments. The Hinter-landers infrequently attended meetings but when change or improvement was on the agenda, would do so to scrutinize and influence the effort. Once an issue was 'off the table,' many would not return until the next contentious initiative presented itself. I suspect this is the norm for any community.

Because of the expensive homes surrounding the many lakes, Big Lake's contribution to the borough's tax appropriations is significant. Even though Big Lake is a diamond in the rough it's a gem of a revenue generator. Whoever controls the tax windfalls controls the direction of growth and maturity of the community, or not.

The borough seat is an hour away; it governs a region roughly the size of West Virginia with a relatively shoestring staff and budget. It has neither the time, resources, nor inclination to focus its attention on the specific interests of 3,500 residents when its constituency exceeds 100,000. Benign neglect is the best form of governance that Big Lakers could hope to receive, and perhaps many in the community prefer it that way. However, many of the community's affluent, long term residents recognized that this 'ungoverned space' would inevitably lead to social and economic deterioration, and that a more benevolent, local guiding hand was required to help Big Lake retain its endearing characteristics.

To that aim, in 2014 a Petitioner petitioned the state government to allow Big Lake to govern itself with a few of the local services by incorporating into a second class city. The strategy was to retain some of the community's property taxes to fund a small city council so decisions effecting the community could be made locally. If the experiment of self-governance proved successful, then in time, the city could take on greater responsibilities; or not, as capabilities proved fitting.

The Petitioner demonstrated local competency in all the require areas necessary to run a small city - Leadership and management skills were evident; the proposed budget was functional, achievable, and fiscally sound. The State approved the petition and established a referendum vote for incorporation to take place in six months, on October 2015.

At that point, the Petitioner established the Ballot Initiative Group Leadership. It immediately began its earnest efforts to get out the vote. The nucleus of the team centered around the community council's board of directors. It was was a wonderfully competent and successful group of individuals with a wide variety of professional skill sets. One was a noted financial advisor; two more were early retired building contractors, another was a former city mayor and state lobbyist, there was a retired school principal, a retired architect, a retired civil servant and me, a retired Army

Colonel. Others came and went from the group as requirements grew to get out the 'Yes' vote.

But, as many residents learned of the initiative, rumors of alarm and pending unease settled on the community and several outspoken personalities formed the "No" vote committee. The ensuing campaign was corrosive, savagely nasty and created communal rifts that are still in evidence these many years later.

The following is an article I wrote in Nov 15 after the election, but never published. It fairly well sums up the results and frustration of the effort.

*"The dye is cast; the will of the residents of our community is evident. The vote results strongly reflect that the community does not want to have the authoritative voice in managing its affairs and directing the future of Big Lake. As a group, we feel sufficiently comforted by other's efforts on our behalf and are complacently entitled to require them to continue to place our interests at the forefront of their actions and decisions.*

*Paradoxically, many opposed to this recent incorporation effort have stated that they support incorporating the community into a City, but just not yet. It's instrumental to note that it took up to five years to arrive the the point where we could vote on incorporation. It would have taken a few more years until the city government could credibly establish itself as a formative instrument of the community. Using this seven year template as a model, if the process started anew tomorrow, we might see the possibility of Big Lakers effectively managing the community's affairs as a legal entity by the year 2022. Even those opposed to this recent incorporation initiative must acknowledge that this places at risk the highly coveted character of Big Lake to the growing undesirable encroachments of growth and change.*

*A wise man once observed that many people invariable lack the art of judging the means to the ends they sincerely wish to achieve. As every seven out of eight residents voted against incorporation, this begs the question of what are they in favor of? Clearly many are for preserving the character of Big Lake and perhaps that a 'No' vote was a means to that end. Yet, they've voted against securing the most formative tool we have to legally sustain Big Lake the way we like it. They have consigned Big Lake to be devoured by outside carnivores like a choice piece of meat.*

*Others have observed that they think we need to be a city, but they didn't like the way the 'Yes' Vote committee (Initiative Ballot Group) conveyed the message – so they voted against their interests. That's akin to a homeowner putting their fingers in their ears, sticking out their tongue, stamping the ground and refusing to move because they don't like the way their neighbor recommended they get out of their house because it was on fire. Petulance in a child is understandable because they lack the world experiences to behave better, and there's usually an adult around to ensure their acts come to no harm. In an adult, it's not becoming, and the only adult left in the room is a distant government who now understands that Big Lakers care less for their future than they do.*

*OK, so now what. How do we preserve Big Lake against undesirable outside encroachments? Should we ignore the changes and growth and hope for the best? Perhaps the best result from the Petitioner's efforts was to raise the community's consciousness of the need to do something. Maybe that will result in more Big Lakers taking an active role in many of the community's voluntary associations. If so, perhaps this entire effort was good for the community?"*

So the article was a bit partisan, much like this one. But it captured the frustration of the surprising landslide loss over an initiative seemingly intended to accomplish what everybody wanted - to retain the character of Big Lake.

The 'Yes' vote wanted to put local decisions in the hands of the residents through locally elected representatives and a small city government. This decision seemed an obvious and preferred alternative from being governed by an assembly seat an hour away with only a single representative who's responsibility covered three different communities.



The alternative course of action preferred by the 'No' vote was to do anything and everything possible to keep power out of the hands of the Initiative Group (Lake-siders) for whom many of the Hinter-landers disdained and distrusted. Having the borough continue its indifferent governance and often misguided control over the community was preferred over

the risks of local governance.

Without getting into too much detail of the combative nature of the local 'Get out the Yes or No' campaigns, I'll highlight a few of the immediate misfortunes for the 'Yes' effort.

- Information received from the Local Boundary Commission (LBC) (the state body that approved the petition) differed from information subsequently received from the State Division of Elections. This disparity was not discovered until 'promises' we're made to the community on how the election would be proceed. Specifically, the LBC advised the initiative group that the current community council board of directors would automatically transition into the city council board of directors for its first year, at which point general elections would be held to elect representative to serve after the transition period. This would help establish the new council with people who currently were knowledgeable about the processes and allow the election to focus on the idea of self governance. This, turned out to be wrong information and the change was contentious. It created an immediate and overwhelming distraction to find capable candidates to serve on the new city council. Many of the current community council board of directors were not interested in paid public service (other than the transition period) and did not wish to run for office. These changes disrupted the 'Yes' campaign from selling the message on the merits of self-governance; and gave fodder for the 'No' campaign to sow the seeds of distrust.

- The State Division of Election further failed to print the vote ballot verbiage as had been previously coordinated with the State LBC. Their poor choice of wording made it difficult for the voter to understand to what choice you were actually in favor of voting. The awkward ballot wording unnecessarily confused the vote and lent another layer of mistrust.

- Although small government and local governance are main tenants of the Republican Party (the community usually voted 'Red'), the Alaska Republican Party sided with the 'No' vote. They did so not based on conservative values but rather on their relationship with a few of the prominent 'No' vote proponents. The party was unrepentant in its efforts to defeat a very conservative, local endeavor to retain the good will of a few of its members.

- Opponents of the initiative coordinated with borough staff and received incorrect information on the redirected funds to the new city and the powers that the local city would assume from the borough. This incorrect information was levied to publicly bludgeon the claims of supportability by the initiative group. If one were a conspiracy theorist, it would be easy to claim that members of the borough sabotaged the effort to retain the Big Lake revenues or uncomplicate their work days by having to deal with with one less city.

- and the list goes on and on.

Seven out of every eight Big Lakers voters voted against the initiative. It was a stunning loss and an unambiguous message from the residents. Or was it? Did the residents vote against local governance, or did they vote against the strong personalities of the initiative ballot group? Who knows, but, the outcome was the same. Following the election and after much consideration I penned a Top Eleven List of Ways to Lose an Initiative Vote: I offer it below for consideration.

The opponents of the initiative fought hard and well, if not at times very underhandedly with questionable information and outright lies. They effectively captured and flamed the fears and ignorance of the local Hinter-lander majority with disinformation and prejudicial passion. They succeeded where the initiative group did not.



A central claim and promise from the 'No' voters was that now that the community was energized, it didn't need the services of a city government to retain the character of Big Lake. With this new sense of purpose they would all band together into an informal social contract to work towards the betterment of the community through active participation in local organizations. They would all commit their time and resources to our mutual benefit. It was their commitment as the alternative to local governance.

The election was four years ago. Since then the members of the initiative ballot group have gone their separate way. Few rarely participate in

community council or community local events. Their passion for volunteering and serving a local cause seems to have dissipated. The commitment for increased levels of community participation from 'No' voters never materialized. They killed off the initiative, and returned from whence they came.

The residents voice in what happens in Big Lake is more limited. The formerly formative and influential bodies that helped guide local activities have declined into social bitching sessions. After the initiative group members left the community council board of directors, the council's had a hard time getting residents to volunteer for the board's positions and even a greater challenge in re-exciting the passions of the residents to get membership rolls up to pre-vote numbers. Few people care to participate. Although the present board members are committed, the council is but a shadow of its former self in terms of focus, vision, and accomplishment. Its influence with the borough has wained. The council's meetings have become information dissemination sessions and a chance to catch up socially with friends.


The legacy of that initiative vote act has resulted in a few predictable changes.

- Prices are high in Big Lake as there is a severe shortage of competitive options, except for liquor and pot. One has to travel twenty minutes away for essential commodities such as hardware or construction materials. There are few services available in town.
- The only dentist, who accepted medicare, closed his office doors for good. I know of no other medical care available nearby.
- The Big Lake Chamber of Commerce disestablished through lack of interest (not helped by the fact that one board member allegedly stole Chamber funds).
- The general public rarely attends the Road Service Committee meetings.
- Where Big Lake once claimed several eating establishments on the lake, they are now down to one that is open part-time.




- There are only two remaining off lake restaurants, one affordable, the other is a bit pricey for Hinter-landers other than for special occasions.
- The local hamburger trailer withered away and closed up.
- The internationally recognized Iron Dog race that once launched from the lake, and was a significant source of income and notoriety, no longer even passes through the area.
- Many of the shops in the local mall are empty with little sign of investment with new businesses.
- On the upside, for a short time, Big Lake grew from three to four liquor stores, but the big box store drove the mom & pop store across the street out of business. Additionally, on the growth side, there are a plethora of marijuana growing business within our neighborhoods and a spike in gravel production and significant truck moments through our on local streets.

Vote YES for incorporating Big Lake as a city!




**YES**



**Just the Facts...**

- **No increase in taxes**
  - A replacement tax with no loss of services
  - Approve 3.09 on ballot.

Current Tax on a \$200,000 home	
Local Levy	9.984
AKA Bond	\$1,796.80
AKA & Bond	6.52
Big Lake (SEA 212)	2.57
Fire Support Area 180	\$756.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,990.80</b>



**Vote YES**

Future Tax on a \$200,000 home	
Local Levy	9.984
AKA Bond	\$1,796.80
AKA & Bond	6.52
Fire Support Area 180	\$756.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$2,990.80</b>

Learn more at the Big Lake Library every Thurs @ 6:00 PM

- **No new Taxes**
- **Improved Roads**
- **Improved Local Control**
- **Our Dollars Spent Locally**

*Any New City Tax, will most be brought to the people for a vote.*

- **Improved Roads**
  - Improved roads with better safety.
  - Better roads means better manage funds for road maintenance
  - Better roads means better access for emergency vehicles.
- **Local Control For Future**
  - Currently the future of Big Lake is in the hands of others. As a city we can shape and define the changes that are coming. Let your voice be heard!
- **Tax Dollars Spent Locally**
  - The City of Big Lake can more efficiently spend Big Lakers' tax dollars in Big Lake!

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*Below is the list of Top Eleven Ways to lose a Ballot Initiative that I penned after the election. Although we had a wonderfully talented team of very competent individuals, we may not have had an amazingly talented team. Each one of the members was very successful at what they did, but as we came together, we committed many unforgivable organizational and strategic errors and paid the inevitable price. If you wish to lose an initiative ballot, commit these errors.*

- 1. Lack clean and clear lines of responsibility / Form a collaborative committee of equals*
- 2. Fail to identify all operational domains, and stubbornly refuse to engage fully with the most influential ones.*
- 3. Disseminate inaccurate information. Don't understand your facts or the 'cause and effect' before engaging in the effort.*
- 4. Do not synchronize, practice, or rehearse your public speaking events. Focus the wrong message with the wrong audience.*
- 5. Mix pleasure and work at group meetings, so they wander and fail to accomplish the intended, essential requirements.*
- 6. Change leadership mid-way through the effort.*
- 7. Fail to establish an active OODO response loop to address emergent issues; lose the initiative.*
- 8. Fail to establish appropriate metrics to calibrate the campaign's effectiveness.*
- 9. Fail to organized with key personnel attending to the most vital elements of success. Have everybody work on everything and nothing.*
- 10. Fail to secure sufficient funding to resource the operation.*
- 11. Sprint through an endurance race.*

*Machiavelli suggested that creators of new systems will earn the enmity of those who profit from the old system. This is very much in evidence in small communities when one is attempting to change the status quo. Be prepared for (have a plan) to address the enmity of your neighbors. Understand their concerns, before they express them, and develop a strategy to assuage their very real (tho perhaps shortsighted) doubts.*