

Guilderland residents win round in tax fight

State could take a special look at their property values

By Rick Karlin

Guilderland

Residents in the Weatherfield neighborhood of this Albany suburb fought the state over taxes and it looks like they may win.

They were up in arms last fall over what were in some cases \$1,200 school tax increases due to what they said was a faulty revaluation of taxable property values by the state. As a result, a package of bills sponsored by Democratic Assemblywoman Pat Fahy and GOP Sen. George Amedore were passed during the last session.

Amedore said they put forth the bills when they saw the size of the tax hikes for the residents.

Two measures, including one that would essentially allow a special look at the neighborhood's property values, have been sent to Gov. Andrew Cuomo's office where he will sign or veto them.

Residents are hoping a decision comes soon, since Voorheesville school officials will in the next two months be sending out their tax bills.

Overall, they are confident they will get a break from what were sudden, unannounced increases which sparked a neighborhood tax revolt.

"This, number one, was an issue of fair treatment," said Diane Reilly, who with her husband, James, began rallying residents of the Weatherfield neighborhood after getting their school property tax bills last year. In the Reillys' case, school taxes rose \$1,200, or 14 percent to \$9,100.

Others saw similar jumps, with some learning that their homes had been assessed, or valued for taxation purposes, at more than what they paid, even after recent purchases.

The issue was two-fold: This small section of Guilderland, along Route 155 near the Albany Country Club, is in the Voorheesville rather than the Guilderland school district.

And the town of Guilderland last year had been subject to a revaluation, or recalibration of comparative property values by the state Office of Real Property Tax Services, which does these checks if a town hadn't done it in a while.

It's not unusual for towns to lag in these revaluations since they are costly. And if the revaluations find that property values have risen sharply, it can mean rapid tax hikes, which often angers homeowners. In

Guiderland, the revaluation hadn't been done since 2005.

The trouble was, state ORPS officials looked at a small number of properties in the town, prompting criticism that it led to distortions in the values.

For instance ORPS looked at only 10 of more than 400 commercial properties in Guiderland. Among the spots looked at were properties in the high-end Stuyvesant Plaza. A town's overall value is based on residential and commercial properties, but this cursory look at the commercial side of things skewed results, said town officials.

"When you have such a small sample the slightest change has a more magnified impact," Fahy said.

As a result, Guiderland's equalization rate, or index of property values compared to other communities, fell from 88 to 75 percent. That meant the Guiderland residents in the Voorheesville district had to pick up a larger share of the tax burden. Often, when the equalization rate falls, it means taxes will rise.

Angry neighborhood residents, after attending Guiderland town and Voorheesville school board meetings en masse, got organized.

The neighborhood is a mix of affluent professionals along with retirees on fixed incomes and they quickly divided up responsibilities in launching a campaign to tackle the problem.

Reilly, a retired teacher, took charge of the email communications while another resident dealt with the state.

Another woman who worked for a lobbying firm, tracked the legislation. Yet another volunteer set up a website, <https://www.weatherfieldphase1.com/school-taxes.html>.

As a result, Fahy and Amedore put together a package that provides for notifications of increased valuations and, perhaps most importantly, would allow for a "segmented rate," in the Weatherfield neighborhood.

Essentially, that means home valuations for the neighborhood would be set on a more granular level, focusing on Weatherfield and running out toward a nearby industrial park, rather than being lumped in with the broader valuation applied to the town as a whole, said Guiderland Supervisor Peter Barber.

"It could mean that their share to the (Voorheesville) schools could be less," said Barber.

He added that Guiderland will be doing a town wide revaluation this coming year.

While the Weatherfield problem is being addressed, lawmakers and others said it's symptomatic of wider problems with property tax values and how they are set for the purposes of taxation.

Weatherfield residents, for one thing, were told flat out by state ORPS officials that revaluations are imperfect. "Even the ORPS panel said they were sorry it was a flawed process," Reilly said, referring to the appointed board that oversees the agency.

The residents of this neighborhood weren't the only ones to complain.

Homeowners and municipal officials in another town in northern New York, Scriba, also contested their valuations in 2017, contending that ORPS had set values that were too high – which would lead to higher school tax bills.

State officials at the time admitted they didn't have enough staffers to fully assess all of the town's real estate.

It's not a new issue.

There have long been complaints about what critics say is a crazy quilt system of calculating taxable values.

Rochester billionaire and one-time gubernatorial candidate Tom Golisano, who has battled the Finger Lakes community of South Bristol over his taxes, has even set up a website <https://www.taxmypropertyfairly.com/> that serves as a guide to the issue and how homeowners can protest if they think their homes are valued too highly.

Regardless of the overall problems, Reilly said she was heartened by the way her neighborhood came together to try and correct what they viewed as an unfair situation.

“It's been a fantastic experience,” she said.

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