

Mayor and Council response to Inquirer Article of 03-07-2010

In the Borough of Lawnside, just as in many other municipalities in New Jersey, property taxes are a source of contention. The internet is replete with articles concerning the plight of cash strapped municipalities, and their residents alike. The reality of where the state of New Jersey is financially, with an \$11 billion budget deficit, does not make the prospect of governing a municipality easy.

As we attempt to do more with less, there is not one tax-paying resident or employee in Lawnside that does not feel the pinch of fiscal cutbacks. This includes elected officials, because we live here too.

The position advanced by the writer of a recent article "**Outdated valuations anger Camden County Homeowners**" as well as those of contacted residents for article content, reached too far in their characterization of Borough Officials sentiments.

By addressing their opinion, I offer the following: The governing body is extremely empathetic towards the plight of the homeowners in both the Lions Gate and the River Run Developments. But we are also equally empathetic towards the middle income families in other parts of town,, as well as our fixed-income senior population that constitute over 50% of our homeowners. Is there a way to make everyone whole and happy? If there is, there is no one in New Jersey that has found that solution yet, not the local Tax Assessor, the Lawnside School District, Camden County, or the State of New Jersey.

When concerned residents file a tax appeal the process is started. As elected officials, we do not, indeed, cannot interfere in that process. As elected officials, we do not approve or deny Tax Appeals. Upon being dissatisfied with the outcome of that process, the residents approached the governing body. Mayor and Council were then prompted to direct the Tax Assessor to review and report potential solutions to the plight of the residents. The various solutions reported left a difficult decision for Mayor and Council, and No choice was a good one.

Once the residents appealed to the County Board of Taxation, Lawnside was ordered to complete a municipal wide revaluation process by December 2011. Elected Officials did not assess these \$400-\$500 homes at 64-68% of their value, which led to the equalized valuation of Lawnside, precipitously dropping from 90% to under 70% which is the basis of the tax court's decision to order a revaluation.

Lawnside is currently in compliance with that order. We have started the revaluation process. However, due to fiscal constraints affecting municipalities all over New Jersey, the Borough cannot hire on the necessary valuation experts until the new budget year starts on July 1, 2010. The total cost of the revaluation is estimated around \$200,000-\$350,000. depending on whether we contract internally or externally. Once the process of digitizing the Tax Map is complete, the new map must be approved by the state. According to our Tax Assessor, map completion and State approval alone take approximately 8 month.

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We are acutely aware that the ordered revaluation process will not be a panacea for the residents of our municipality. It will hurt some residents further, particularly our fixed income seniors, while not meeting the level of relief that others are hoping to achieve. We will bear that burden along with our neighbors, because we are taxpayers too. We do care and we are working towards a solution. Characterizing our efforts as un-caring and divisive is not productive, and only serves to pour gasoline on an already raging fire. We know that part of the solution is to communicate openly with those among us who are hurting and are threatened with higher taxes or worse, loss of their homes. While any one action we take may not meet the specific needs of any one family, we strive to address the plight of all. We will continue to reach out to state, and county officials on behalf of any resident facing dire circumstances, while the process moves to its conclusion.

Every resident of Lawnside is a valued resident, new, old, young, or senior. Let us not allow a lack of communication, or seeking answers in the wrong circles stop us from working together to safeguard our proud and unique community.