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Top Stories

Aldermen ponder budget; critics say high reassessments nullify tax rate decrease

Angela Carter, Register Staff
03/30/2007

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-NEW HAVEN — The Board of Aldermen's Finance Committee Thursday continued reviewing the mayor's \$445.2 million budget proposal for the 2007-08 fiscal year amid growing criticism of a proposed property tax freeze for seniors.

An ad hoc group of residents has started a Weblog on city issues and an online petition against Mayor John Destefano Jr.'s modest tax levy reduction from 44.85 to 43.29 mils.

DeStefano has asked the Board of Aldermen to phase in over five years new property assessments that were determined last year through revaluation.

Jeffrey Kerekes, a resident of the Wooster Square neighborhood who attended the Finance Committee's budget workshop at City Hall, said the group is trying to draw attention to a provision in the elderly tax freeze proposal that would charge interest on deferred taxes. Over time, that could severely diminish or wipe out a homeowner's equity, he said.

The proposal would allow homeowners, age 70 or older, who have lived in the city at least 10 years and have a maximum income of \$50,000, to freeze their tax liability at the amount of the July 1, 2006, tax bills.

Those earning \$50,000 to \$70,000 would be able to defer taxes above 2006 rates until the real property is sold or transferred but the city would place a lien on the property and when it changes hands, the city would charge the going prime interest rate.

"I'm not sure they (elderly) understand how that would add up over time," Kerekes said. His assessment increased about 2½ times, he said.

"If you look at the reassessments, they don't seem unreasonable," Kerekes said. "But if you're doubling the assessments and keeping the mill rate nearly the same, you're really doubling the taxes."

The citizen group is combing through the mayor's budget proposal and looking for alternatives and cuts to recommend to the aldermen.

"We're looking at where we can save some money in this budget," and proposals will be submitted to the Finance Committee at its April 19 budget hearing at 6 p.m. at City Hall, 165 Church St.

Committee Vice Chairwoman Ina Silverman, D-25, of Westville said the panel wanted to have a hearing on the freeze Thursday but was not able to publish public notices in time. "We might have a special meeting," she said.

Paul Nunez, the mayor's deputy chief of staff, said that with the recommended conditions the city estimates a \$1.5 million revenue loss in the first year of the program. Approximately 2,715 households would qualify under current language.

"It's a thoughtful piece of legislation. We're trying to address those people who are overburdened and want to live at home until they no longer can or they're dead," Nunez said.

Silverman said the proposal is written to provide relief to those who need it most while minimizing the city's loss in tax revenue.

Foxon Alderman Robert Lee, D-11, has proposed separate tax breaks for veterans that go into effect in 2008.

Visit <http://newhavenissues.blogspot.com> and www.ipetitions.com/petition/newhaventaxreduction for more information on the ad hoc group.

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