

Levy Up 15 Percent

Tax Rate Down in Sea Isle After Last Year's Reval

By JOE HART

SEA ISLE CITY — The tax rate here is down a deceiving 15 percent over last year, but property assessments climbed more than 32 percent.

In 2007, the total valuation of property in Sea Isle City was \$3.62 billion compared to this year's total of \$4.78 billion. The amount to be raised through taxation increased from \$10.5 million in 2007 to \$12.1 million this year, a difference of 15.25 percent.

Homeowners, therefore, would pay \$33 less per \$100,000 of assessed value this year, but their homes would be valued a third higher on average.

The tax rate went from 29.1 cents in 2007 to 25.4

cents this year, but a property valued at \$100,000 last year would now be assessed at \$132,000. Last year, therefore, that proposed homeowner's local tax bill would have been \$291 and now with the higher assessment the tax bill would be around \$335.

On April 8, Sea Isle City Council passed (4-1) a \$17.41 million spending plan, which is up 7 percent from the 2007 total of \$16.27 million.

Council President Mike McHale was the only dissenting vote.

McHale told the Herald the administration's failure to act on several cost-saving ideas was the reason for his "no" vote on the budget.

Some of the suggestions he spoke of were eliminating health benefits for part-time professionals, making changes in city employees' benefit package and collecting money from an old water and sewer extension project.

"They had months to act on these suggestions, but did nothing," he said.

The city did make some alterations to the originally proposed budget that reduced the proposed levy increase from 17.5 percent

to 15.25 percent. According to McHale, the changes came from releasing an assessment trust fund and eliminating a dispatcher position from the city's Public Safety Department.

The administration said more savings are on the way.

In March, the city unveiled a new initiative, dubbed the Blueprint for the Future, that will help Sea Isle City's leaders gauge how effectively city services are being provided to taxpayers.

According to a city press release, the evolving program is considered a "work in progress" by the administration and is designed to help city planners better prepare themselves for the future by better understanding the limitations that slow progress today.

"The department analyses are in progress and will be reviewed with the public later in the summer," City Administrator George Savastano stated. "But the city is optimistic that revisions to our healthcare programs will be able to be implemented this year that will result in savings to all Sea Isle City taxpayers."

The action plan for Blueprint consists of a detailed

department analysis, a position and salary study, gathering information from service providers, the implementation of an incentive program to expedite reduction in workforce, as well as a full review of healthcare benefits, labor contract and emergency services, the release continued.

Additionally, the plan includes a facility assessment, improving communication to the public, implementing the city's master plan, examine zoning boundaries, and establishing a master plan. Personnel policies and the city's capital plan will also be reviewed.

McHale said he supported the Blueprint program, which will eventually save tax dollars, but was disappointed that the administration failed to save more money this year.

Tom Henry, president of the Sea Isle City Taxpayers Association (SICTA), also said his group would have liked to have seen additional cuts. He told the Herald that altering the employee benefit packages would have saved the city over \$400,000 this year alone.

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