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Reform unites residents

Groups are formed to press for change in taxation system

By Erikah Haavie
Poughkeepsie Journal

When Bruce Williams first moved to his Town of Red Hook home 34 years ago, he paid \$800 in property taxes.

Since then, his tax bill has jumped to \$6,000. Of that amount, \$4,500 goes for school taxes.

"The tax situation is totally out of control," said Williams, also a school bus driver for the Red Hook district.

His frustration over school taxes led him to join the Tax Reform Effort of Northern Dutchess.

About 75 people attended the first meeting of the nonpartisan group started in late spring with the goal of adequately and fairly funding schools while taking the burden off property taxpayers.

In recent months, community groups focused on school tax reform have been popping up across Dutchess and Ulster counties. Regional groups now exist in northern, southern, eastern and central Dutchess.

Most revolve around lobbying legislators at the state level in an effort to change the way schools are funded.

Some groups are in their infancy, learning about the basics of school funding proposals.

Others will soon be starting active campaigns of letter writing and petition drives.

Most don't yet have a specific solution. They're just pushing for something to be done.

Vicky Perry, director of Tax Reform Effort of Northern Dutchess, said this year's school budget defeats were "a wake-up call" for many people.

Voters in nine of 13 school districts in Dutchess defeated 2006-07 spending plans in May.

Edward McCormick, an Arlington schools trustee, then described Dutchess as a "community suffering from tax fatigue."

While reduced school budgets were all approved on the second go-round in June, the vote brought attention to the issues of rising school budgets and property taxes and the system of funding state schools.

Local school districts rely heavily on property taxes paid by homeowners.

The Tax Defense Alliance, unlike other groups, has its main focus in bringing changes in Wappingers, Dutchess County's largest school district.

More than a dozen people who are fed up with school taxes joined the group, which formed after May's community budget vote.

"Nothing had changed" after the election, said Joe Inconorato, a member of the alliance and a

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Karl Rabe photos/Poughkeepsie Journal
Tom Hurley, center, of the Town of Clinton, speaks to residents of the Millbrook Central School District during a meeting this month at Washington town hall in Millbrook. The meeting focused on the school district's taxes and budget.

On the Web

- New York Property Tax Reform Coalition, based in Highland: www.nypropertytaxreform.org
- Tax Defense Alliance for Wappingers district: www.taxdef.org
- Tax Nightmare, a property tax reform group based in Gardiner: www.taxnightmare.org
- Tax Reform Effort of Northern Dutchess (TREND): www.trendny.org
- Hudson Valley Property Tax Reform, based in Stone Ridge: <http://hvpropertytaxreform.org>
- Millbrook group, informally known as Concerned Citizens of the Millbrook district: Web site under development.
- Help Arlington Lower Taxes: www.arlingtonschools.org

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Wappingers school board member.

The same three trustees, Anthony LoCicero, Joseph Porpora and himself, were re-elected to the board, Inconorato said.

He said he views the increasing school taxes as being due, in part, to the mediocre performance of the school board.

Trustees need to be better leaders in managing district resources and in acting independently of employee labor unions, Inconorato said.

Independence stressed

"I would agree that reforms are needed. I would disagree that school boards are not independent and functional," Wappingers board President Anthony LoCicero said.

"We are quite independent," he said — the reason why some contracts still haven't been finalized with district labor unions.

Inconorato said he hopes to inform and energize the Wappingers community to be the catalyst for reform.

Similarly, a flyer advertising a community meeting to discuss school tax reform in the Millbrook district read, "It's time to take action!"

The first meeting, held July 11, drew more than 30 district residents to discuss concerns.

While the group doesn't have an official name yet, Town of Washington resident Kerry Weller, one of the organizers, said members plan to pursue alternatives to the use of property taxes in funding schools.

"Hopefully, we can all join together," Weller said.

Perry, a Town of Red Hook resident, said she hopes to offer a basic layer of education to the community through a series of guest speakers.

The Tax Reform Effort of Northern Dutchess also plans to bring in legislators with various proposals for school reform, such as Assemblymen Joel Miller, R-Poughkeepsie, and Patrick Manning, R-East Fishkill, who have both advocated an income-based tax system.

The income-based property tax is "the lesser of all evils," said LaGrange resident Carl Popp, who recently got involved with the tax reform group.

He owns 232 acres of land in Pine Plains. If taxes keep escalating, he may have to sell land to be developed.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Popp said.

Fairness is goal

While Perry doesn't necessarily expect the group to champion one proposal over another, she hopes to bring families with children and senior citizens together to fight for fairness in school funding.

"When citizens know about the issue, it makes sure that something gets done about it," Perry said.

Highland resident Robin Vaccai-Yess, organizer of the New York Property Tax Reform Coalition, is advocating for legislation, including the Equity in Education Act, sponsored by Assemblyman Kevin Cahill, D-Kingston.

She has collected 300 signatures from 14 counties so far in her online petition and hopes to see a statewide grassroots effort in tax reform.

"This is an election year. This is the time to make noise," said Vaccai-Yess, who works as a certified financial planner.

The Arlington district started its effort, Help Arlington Lower Taxes, about two years ago. It now has a steering committee of between 12 and 15 people.

At their reorganization meeting in July, Wappingers school trustees decided to join with Arlington in their school tax reform effort.

"Clearly, people are being pushed beyond their limits," LoCicero said, one of the reasons the board wanted to look at alternatives in property tax reform.

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"We're thrilled," Arlington school board President Kelly Lappan said.

While some Wappingers trustees were concerned about the name of Arlington's HALT committee, Lappan said, "we're happy to change our initials to get the job done."

Arlington hasn't taken a stand on how taxes would be collected, but rather is focused on how state aid would be distributed to schools.

The committee is planning an active campaign in late summer and fall to promote letter writing and petitions.

With the two large voices together, Lappan said she's hoping to have a large impact on state legislators.

Assemblyman Thomas Kirwan, R-Newburgh, said he believed school tax reform would be a number one topic for the Legislature in the next session.

Anything would be better than the current archaic system, he said.

"There's just no fairness to it," Kirwan said.

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