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Kane residents benefit from county tax mistake; DuPage residents outraged

DAVE
GATHMAN

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Last week I opened a letter from our mortgage company and discovered it contained a check for \$933.63. The bank had been requiring us to pay too much money into our tax-and-insurance escrow account, the letter explained, but our property taxes have been dropping. And sure enough, our home's total tax bill has gone down four years in a row. This summer it plummeted by 23 percent. The taxes we owe to Elgin School District U46, for example, dropped from \$2,755 last summer to \$2,127 this year.

But we live in the Kane County section of School District U46 and Elgin Community College District 509. Someone who lives in the DuPage County sections of U46 and ECC — in parts of Bartlett and Wayne, for example — tell a very different story. “My taxes paid to U46 went up 11 percent this year and 8.6 percent last year,” Jay Langfelder of Bartlett says.

“I haven't had a raise in five years and my taxes have increased in the last two years over 33 percent,” says Patti Rouse of Bartlett.

Outraged by what looks like huge school tax increases during a time of near-zero salary growth and inflation, hundreds of DuPage taxpayers turned out for a townhall meeting set up in a Bartlett church by two Republican Party committeemen on Aug. 12. And about 80 of them packed this week's meeting of the U46 School Board to complain.

“Why aren't you watching your budget the way I have to watch

mine?” Rouse asked the board members. “I'm not your ATM.”

But this discrepancy — or at least most of it — isn't the school district's fault.

Illinois has an almost ridiculously complicated system of dividing up the real estate tax load, and it gets even more complicated when a governmental body, such as U46 and Elgin Community College, include parts of more than one county. U46 extends into Kane, DuPage and Cook counties. ECC also covers part of McHenry.

When the U46 and ECC boards decide how much they want in taxes for the coming year, they send that number, otherwise known as a tax levy, to the Illinois Department of Revenue.

The state people then compare how much the properties are worth within the school districts in each of the counties, otherwise known as the assessed valuation. It takes those numbers and divides up the levy between the counties based on the relative percentages.

But something nasty happened over the last two years. Nasty, that is, if you live in DuPage County. Nice if you live in Kane. The staff of Kane County Clerk Jack Cunningham made a mistake when they added up the value of all Kane County properties in U46 and ECC. They subtracted the value of certain deductions while their counterparts in Cook and DuPage were including those deductions as required under a new state law. To the Department of Revenue, it seemed that Kane County's total property values were not dropping as fast as those in DuPage and Cook. So land owners in DuPage, and originally those in Cook, were assigned an especially high share of the tax levies U46 and ECC had requested.

The mistake finally was caught late this spring, in time for the state to correct the final 2014 tax bills in Cook County. But Kane and

DuPage already had sent out their bills. So DuPage homeowners like Langfelder and Rouse were stuck with an unfairly high share of the cost of running U46 and ECC. And we in Kane got away — so far — with an unfairly low share.

Angry crowd

It was one of the angriest and most unruly crowds of any meeting I have covered. Even after the meeting moved on to other topics, they frequently shouted out with sarcasm to the school board members and administrators.

“You're a joke!” one audience member shouted at one point, causing his comrades to applaud. The board members didn't help that situation, as District U46 Board President Donna Smith insisted they must rigidly adhere to their rule of never answering questions or concerns raised during the public comment time. When you have 80 outraged people in a room, incensed by some largely incorrect ideas, common sense says that you should bend a rule or two and talk about their concerns.

Their huge tax bills inspired them to attack several aspects of U46 spending, such as how the district pays as much as \$1,000 each to participants in training programs designed to get Hispanic and African-American parents more involved in their children's schools.

The crowd also zeroed in on a newspaper story that stated that the total U46 budget has gone up over \$100 million since 2007. District U46's director of financial operations, Dale Burnidge — who by coincidence was introducing the proposed 2014-2015 district budget at that same meeting — explained that this was mostly just a mirage caused by a change in accounting rules. Without that change, Burnidge said, total U46 spending has gone up \$55 million over those seven years, or an average of 1.95 percent a year.

When Burnidge claimed in his

budget presentation that total income from real estate taxes has “flattened out for the past four years,” the crowd laughed and hooted as if he were a stand-up comedian. But the figures back him up. The district's property tax income this year is projected to be just 1.05 percent more than last summer.

It's just that a lot more of it will come from DuPage's residents and a lot less from Kane's.

Beware, Kane folk

Now that the assessment mistake has been found, a second shoe is about to drop. When the time comes to figure out next summer's tax bills, state officials say they will put in a correction factor that makes DuPage taxpayers pay less than they would otherwise to U46 and ECC while the Kane taxpayers in those districts will have to pay more.

The notice I get about our escrow account a year from now will be a lot less cheery. And the Bartlett people's a lot more so.

These folks have a right to be mad, and there are parts of the U46 budget that may deserve some looking into. Like how many administrators who get a \$100,000-plus a year salary the district really needs. Or whether the typical teacher should be getting a 7 percent raise under their new contract when people like Patti Rouse have gone five years with zero percent.

But when the DuPage County taxpayers complain to the school board members, they're mainly attacking the wrong people. Their pain has been inflicted almost entirely by a mistake made inside the Kane County clerk's office.

Angry taxpayers are often given advice to take action in the voting booth. But in this case, they can't even vent their anger that way against Kane County Clerk Jack Cunningham, he wouldn't be on the DuPage ballot.