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Bill would add to property tax relief

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By Angela Carter

House Bill No. 5342, An Act Concerning the Elderly Tax Freeze Program, would make municipalities that enact tax relief programs eligible for reimbursement from the state on properties that meet the criteria of the bill.

The General Assembly's Select Committee on Aging reviewed dozens of property tax relief proposals this session. HB 5342 combines several ideas and has made it the farthest, gaining a favorable recommendation and advancement to the Finance, Revenue and Bonding Committee.

Alderwomen Arlene DePino, R-18, of Morris Cove and Ina Silverman, D-25, of Westville, worked with Mayor John DeStefano Jr. and other administrators on a tax freeze plan that would allow residents, 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 the difference between the 2006 rate and future annual rates until the real property is sold or transferred. The city would place a lien on the property and interest would accrue until it changes hands.

The deferment would be capped at increases of \$2,000 annually. Amounts above the cap would be due each year.

The aldermanic Finance Committee is holding a public hearing on the proposal at 5:30 p.m. today in the Aldermanic Chamber at City Hall, 165 Church St.

Residents flocked to a budget hearing in support of the proposal on buses provided by senior centers but expressed concern about how income is calculated and losing the benefit if they face circumstances that force a transfer of assets.

An ad hoc citizen group opposes the lien provision, saying it could eat up the equity seniors build up in their homes. "We all know about the magic of compounding interest," says Jeffrey Kerekes, a member of the group.

The General Assembly bill applies to couples earning \$40,300 or less and singles earning \$33,800 or less who occupy the home, are age 70 or older, and have lived in the state for at least one year before filing for the

freeze.

State Sen. Paul Doyle, D-Wethersfield, co-chairman of the Select Committee on Aging, said Friday the state bill proposes to reimburse municipalities for lost tax revenue above the fixed level. It also eliminates an asset test or placement of liens for people who meet the state standards.

"The city would have a right to go beyond (the limits of the bill), but would only get reimbursed for the ones who qualify," Doyle said.

It awaits fiscal analysis and action by the legislature's Finance Committee. "It's a bipartisan bill. The key will be whether we have enough money. We've got to see how big the price tag is and then we've got to fight for it," Doyle said.

Other relief options approved this term include a veteran's abatement, introduced by Foxon Alderman Robert Lee, D-11; and an interest waiver for military personnel serving in Iraq, introduced by Hill Alderman Jorge Perez, D-5, and Annex Alderman Alphonse Paolillo Jr., D-17.

Angela Carter can be reached at 789-5614 or acarter@nhregister.com .

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