

NEW HAVEN INDEPENDENT

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Tax Assessor Grilling Continues

BY **Thomas MacMillan** | JUL 26, 2010 6:19 PM

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THOMAS MACMILLAN PHOTO

After four hours of public complaints about alleged mistakes by his office and calls for his resignation, tax assessor Bill O'Brien chalked the invective up to "misperceptions" and stress because of a flagging economy.

O'Brien's comments came at the end of a marathon session of the Board of Aldermen's Tax Abatement Committee, which met for over six hours on Monday. It was the latest in a series of contentious meetings at which aldermen and members of the public have grilled Tax Assessor Bill O'Brien about irregularities in tax bills and tax assessments.

In May, local artists [complained of receiving across-the-board \\$5,000 tax assessments](#) this year. This included, in some cases, huge increases for property they said they never bought.

In June, [the complaints continued](#). More artists and small-businesses complained about unexplained increases in tax bills. Alderwoman Andrea Jackson-Brooks decried the revocation of a long-standing tax-exempt status for a piece of property used for church parking.

Amid these complaints—and [botched seniors' tax bills](#) and [mysterious car tax hikes](#)—12 aldermen [called for the mayor to fire O'Brien](#).

Members of the tax abatement committee have also called for members of the Board of Assessment Appeals to appear before them, and threatened to summon them with subpoena power if they do not. See [here](#) for Betsy Yagla's coverage of the absentee appeals board.

In advance of tonight's meeting, Mayor John DeStefano held a press conference Monday. He promised a more professional appeals board and more visits by assessors to businesses before raising their bills.

O'Brien has maintained that his office is doing an acceptable job. At 1 a.m. on Tuesday, after the meeting adjourned, he reflected on the hours of public testimony he had heard. "Let's put it in context," he said. He said he counted 22 separate complaints. "Out of 100,000 accounts, that's not so bad."

O'Brien said he heard a lot of inaccuracies in the testimony, like people claiming they had spoken with him when they never had. Or people claiming they were hung up on or not called back, when they weren't and they were, respectively.

O'Brien said that apart from the mess-up on the senior tax bills, this has not been an exceptional year for mistakes.

So why is everyone up in arms?

"It's about the economy," O'Brien said. People are stressed about the recession, he said. You can see it in the Tea Party movement, he said. "It's just frustration. All that stuff comes up at this time."

O'Brien acknowledged that some valid concerns were raised. He said his office is taking measures to improve quality control, like recording phone calls and office interactions. That protects his staff too, he said. It prevents taxpayers from claiming they were hung up on when they weren't, or that they were verbally abused when in fact they were verbally abusive.



Moments later, committee chairman Alderman Michael Smart (at center in photo) said that's not enough. "Anything short of his resignation is unacceptable."

"We can't get straight answers," he said. "We need to acknowledge there is a problem."

This isn't just any other year, Smart said. "We've never had hundreds of people come to the Tax Abatement Committee. People didn't even know we existed."

Smart said members of the tax assessment appeals board will be subpoenaed to appear at the Tax Abatement Committee's next meeting, on Aug. 23.

Live Blog

Live-blogging commences below. (Note: only text inside quotation marks is directly quoted; the rest is

paraphrasing. Observations and comments are generally in brackets. Names are spelled correctly or best-guess.)

6:24 p.m.: The room is filling up here. Rebecca Turcio is handing out flyers that say “DeStefano Dump Him,” with a picture of a dumpster. A number of people are wearing stickers that say “Thank You Peoples Center,” referring to the Howe Street non-profit that received a \$3,000 tax bill this year, [according to the Register](#).

6:32: A long line of people are signing up to speak. They’re already on the third sheet.

I just spoke with Alfred Marder, head of the People’s Center, he said he already went to the Board of Assessment Appeals to fight the center’s tax bill, but the board ruled against the organization.



6:36: More signs. Big ones. “A Miracle: Used Cars Worth More” and “Is This How We Do Our Economic Development.” They’re held aloft by Jeff Kerekes and another budget watchdog. They’re standing behind the back row. It’s standing room only in here now.

6:41: Chairman Michael Smart is calling the meeting to order. He’s joined at the table by Aldermen Greg Morehead, Claudette Robinson-Thorpe, Marcus Paca, Charles Blango, Darnell Goldson, Arlene DePino, Al Paolilo, Alex Rhodeen, and Andrea Jackson-Brooks.

Smart reads the [agenda](#). The meeting will begin with that “workshop” portion of the meeting, “To discuss tax appeals and assessment appeals with City officials.”

6:44: Smart: “I’m glad to be here and be alive.” A reference to his [recent brush](#) with an armed burglar.

Smart: Calls for a round of applause for the “great showing” here in the aldermanic chamber. He recognizes the other aldermen in the chamber. He says “we’ll start with public testimony.” [Smart later said that 24 aldermen made appearances at the meeting. That’s almost the full board of 30.]

6:46: Elder Willie Johnson is the first to step up. He passes out copies of a letter he will read from Bishop Roberty J. Gay.

He says: We’re asking for forgiveness of the taxes billed to the St. Matthew’s church at 383 and 395 Dixwell Ave. [This is the church Jackson-Brooks [spoke about at the last meeting](#).] The property in question has been tax exempt since 2005, when the church bought it. It’s used for free church parking and nothing else. The Church had planned to demolish the buildings on the property, but they were found to have asbestos. The electricity is disconnected to the building and it has not and never will be used for profit by the church.

6:56: Smart: Did the tax assessor walk through the property with you before you received a bill?

Johnson: No. I believe it was a drive-by.

Blango: When was it purchased?

Johnson: April 2005. We wanted to take down the building, but it was too expensive because of the asbestos. We still plan to demolish it. We've never used the building. We are a tax exempt 501c3.

Goldson: Did you appeal the tax bill?

Johnson: Yes.

Goldson: Was there a hearing?

Johnson: Yes.

Jackson-Brooks: I testified on this matter. We met with one person from the commission and we were denied.

Goldson: The reason?

Jackson-Brooks: We were denied.

6:59: Smart recognizes more aldermen who have arrived. Also, State Rep. Gary Holder-Winfield is here, and State Sen. Toni Walker.

Goldson reads a letter from the owner of 644 Orange Street, Joseph Viglianti. He says that his assessment went up almost \$30,000 due to failure to file a form. "We have mailed it in on May 19... as we have every year." The tax office was very unhelpful. He has always paid his taxes on time.

7:02: Next up is Elder Newton Dixon from Bethel Temple Church of God and Christ on Front Street. He says: We are an exempt church, but we have received letters of assessment. We have tried to speak to someone and "it seems like nothing is happening."

Jackson-Brooks: This is the same issue St. Matthew's faces. They have a second building used for Sunday school and other church activities. The pastor would have been here to speak but for a death in his family.

7:07: Helen Martin Dawson is next. She lives on Liberty Square in a "cooperative." "We received a letter increasing our taxes." Where do these numbers come from? Over \$1300 more. We get nothing from the city. We take care of our own trash. "We're struggling to get our taxes paid." The city gives us nothing. "There has not been an assessor on our property." They said there were 48 units and there are only 36. She's lived there since 1969.

7:11: Peter Chapman takes a seat at the table. He lives on Wallace Street. "I don't have a current tax issue." But he wants to add to the drive for accountability. "We're moving towards ... taxation without representation." But, "the position [of tax assessor] makes for an easy target." Watch out for a witch hunt. Calling for the resignation of someone in an underfunded department is premature. People are going to start leaving New Haven if things don't change.

7:13: Wendy Hamilton takes the mic. "Is Mr. O'Brien here?" "Mr O'Brien, I have two words for you." [The crowd braces itself.] "Good. Bye." [A round of applause.] You probably live in Madison or Guilford. "You have the work ethic of a sea slug [gasps from the crowd] and the compassion of a Nazi camp guard [applause]." Even before this, New Haveners were overtaxed. Tax Yale. [Applause.]

7:15: Calvin Benell sits. He says he's from Meriden. He's president of the Connecticut Alliance for Retired Americans, 2,300 of whom live in New Haven. We object to the improper assessment of the People's Center, which is a member of the alliance. They have done more for the people of the city than the city has, in some ways. He says he's used the center for meetings, when the city has not provided space for the organization. [Applause.]





7:19: Three men sit down at the table. Neil Riggione (at right in photo), he lives in Orange. Donald Siclari (at left), Neil's accountant in West Haven. John Sember, Neil's other accountant. Riggione begins: "I have a story to tell." I'm a New Haven guy. I'm a taxpayer. I represent Double-R Investments, my family, which own 70 Lawrence St. in New Haven and 169 East St.—R Bar. My dad owned a bar in the 50s on Legion Avenue. In 2005, my family listened to the mayor's propaganda and I was an advocate of bringing business back to New Haven. My daughter bought a condo on Court Street using a city program in 2005. We had been in business in Milford and Orange. In 2006, I purchased 70 Lawrence Street and the business at 169 East St. "I was under the impression that the mayor was trying to bring business into New Haven." We sold a building in Milford to make purchased in New Haven. "Maybe we made a mistake." I've been on a journey battling Mr. O'Brien.

I'll start with 70 Lawrence. In 2006, taxes were \$10,000. Seven months later taxes went to \$33,000. It's gone up \$4,000 to \$5,000 every year. "It's turned a good investment into a bad investment." The assessment went from \$250,000 to \$780,000. I thought I'd made a compromise deal with the city in December of 2008 that it would be \$600,000.

"We do not have to pay taxes that are unfair." [Applause.]

In the first week of January, 2009, I was told to call Bill O'Brien. I had a copy of the compromise offer. O'Brien told me the deal was off, told me he'd see me in court, and hung up on me.

I got the New Haven properties in a 1031 exchange, a swap for the Milford property. So there was no assessment.

In the spring of 2009, we went before a mediator. O'Brien asked for an appraisal. An appraiser I picked out of the phone book valued the property at around \$600,000, but O'Brien rejected it.

On to 169 East St. The taxes have tripled there as well. That's the personal property tax at R-Bar. We all know personal property depreciates over the years. There is no kitchen. The city said there is \$300,000 worth of equipment. We proved that the equipment value was \$105,000. We won an appeal, but taxes at the bar went from \$3000 a year to \$9,000.

"I'm gonna continue my fight, only because this is not fair. ... It goes against everything that this city is trying to accomplish." In '04 and '05 everyone was coming back to New Haven, now everyone's talking about leaving.

7:38: Siclari: I was born in New Haven. We produced everything we could to the assessor to try to alleviate the taxes. "Communication is the most important thing. If you can't communicate with your constituents you don't belong in that position." [Applause.] They put an offer on the table and then said "forget it." "That's a travesty."

7:42: Goldson: The Lawrence Street property is a rental. So when you're taxes go up, what happens?

Riggione: I absorb the cost. I cannot cover it with rents. "We were afraid to go up \$25 [in rent] this year."

7:46: Ray Pompano speaks. He says he's a New Havener and Wilbur Cross grad. He speaks out against the taxation of the People's Center. "Was there an act of Congress?" How can you tax an organization that has

never been taxed?

7:48: Drew King is up. "This has been a long time coming." He reads from a statement: I owed tax on two vehicles. One was stolen. The other was taken by a marshal and sold or junked or auction. I received tax bills for both. I had a terrible time at the assessor's office. "He really disrespected my very bad." I asked him how he sleeps at night. I was told I need to find who they sold his cars to. "I almost blew my top." He had a smirk on his face. ... I thought I would come down to the assessor's office and he would help me, but it was a disaster. I'm only glad that I can't say it was a racial thing. "He did it to EVERYbody." [laughter and applause]



7:48: Barbara Iannaccone (pictured), homeowner on Williams Street. She says: I have a 16-year-old 1994 Ford station wagon. Last year taxes were \$60.78. This year it went down 62 cents. I can't even buy a cheap loaf of bread with that. My name was misspelled on my property tax bill. I was told to go to the assessor's office. "Some lady in there said, 'What do you want me to do about it?' Is that some kind of customer service?!" I had to take time off from my job earning \$8 an hour to come down to the office. Plus, I was on the elderly tax freeze. My husband and I live a little bit over the poverty level, but we always pay our taxes. We got a tax freeze because of our income. Used to pay \$4600 taxes until 2009, when they went up to \$5,600. Then they went up to \$5,908 in 2010. I get a letter saying there was a mistake with the senior tax freeze. "How do they assess your taxes? They don't even look at the property." My house was built in 1840. My gross income between me and my husband last year was \$18,000. But they jack up taxes every year! "DeStefano, I got to say, he did a good job with the schools, but with everything else, he sucks." [Applause.] The people in the offices are very rude. [Wild applause.]

Goldson: Did they correct your name?

Iannaccone: No. They hung up the phone on me.

Goldson: When did you first approach them?

Iannaccone: July 3rd.

8:07: Jean Kobalanski, representing her mother-in-law Irene Kobalanski. Irene struggles to pay taxes. She's afraid she's going to lose her house. Smart's always helped my mother-in-law, "I know you'll get things right."

Smart: We'll do whatever we have to do.

8:09: Ann Eisner lives in Bethany. She rents an art studio at Erector Square. She says: Year after year I've been assessed a \$5,000 tax bill. "I've got junky old tables," in a tiny little 300-square-foot room. I appealed and

got it down to \$1100. "I have just a bunk of junk in there." "I really resent the dishonesty that I see going on." "I don't want to rent in New Haven any more." I begged the assessor to come to my studio. He wouldn't. I don't mind paying taxes, but they've got to be accurate.

Goldson: What was your previous assessment?

Eisner: In 2007, I declared \$93 and they assessed me at \$81. I paid \$3 in tax. I could very easily stay out in the country. I like the energy in the city, but "I'm getting to feel really resentful."

Goldson: You had a hearing, the hearing officer told you it would be reduced to \$300 and then you got a bill for \$1100.

Eisner: Exactly.

8:14: Smart: We invited Jacqueline Harris and Michael Newton, members of the Board of Assessment Appeals. How did they respond to our request to appear?

Aldermanic Staff: Newton didn't respond. Harris said she couldn't make it.

Smart: Please begin the process of subpoenaing them. "We're not playing games here." [Applause.]

8:15: Alderwomen Dolores Colon and Migdalia Castro face the committee.

Colon reads a letter from Alderwoman Bitsie Clark, in support of the People's Center: It is a non-profit that provides office space and a space for meeting. The center is dedicated to helping the poor and those who are discriminated against. Please look favorably on the People's Center petition.

Colon: I've had many meetings at the center with my union of Yale workers. Many unions meet there. The doors are always open. People also go there to find a warm place to stay during the day. A meeting at the People's Center helped me end up in a home in the Hill and not homeless. [Applause.]

Castro asks supporters of the People's Center to stand up. [Over 20 people stand.] I was a welfare recipient. The People's Center showed me the way to be productive. "They deserve all of our respect and our honor."

8:27: Smart to aldermanic staff: Our next meeting will be Aug. 23. I'd like Harris and Newton subpoenaed to appear then.

8:28: Shirley Lawrence reads a letter of support for the New Haven People's Center from the Connecticut Center For A New Economy (CCNE). [Applause.]

Lawrence: I'm an organizer with CCNE. This tax situation is scary. "Do I really want to buy a house in the city of New Haven?"

8:32: Goldson thanks Smart for his leadership.

Micheal Quoka reads from a letter: I received a letter about delinquent property tax, saying I owe over \$700 in property taxes. "I had no idea what this might be for." I called the tax office, they told me to call the assessor's office. I was told the bill was for cars with out of state plates on my property. I don't live at the property. I've never seen the vehicles there. I asked O'Brien when the cars were seen on the property and what the make and model of the cars is. He couldn't tell me. I asked for explanation. He said, "That's not important. You owe the money." It seems the assessor can pick properties and assign bills arbitrarily. How can I be charged for cars that do not belong to me and I have never seen? [Applause.]

8:37: Elizabeth Johnson lives on Humphrey Street with her husband. She says: I can speak for all the veterans, the elderly, and the handicapped, and taxpayers. Mr. O'Brien does not do his job. "He needs to step down, so that someone else can take his position." I have a 1992 Chrysler LeBaron, "a rust bucket." When I got the car in 2007, my car taxes were \$42.41 until this year, when they went to over \$50. "The car is really a terrible piece of garbage." Our house taxes went up \$1,000. [Rebecca Turcio is holding up Kerekes' sign "A Miracle Used Cars Worth More." She standing over to the right, near where O'Brien is sitting.] It's not fair that this man [O'Brien] sits behind his desk and doesn't go visit houses.

Goldson: Did you say your taxes went up because of the mill rate increase?

Johnson: Yes. We were also told that my husband makes too much money. He's on a fixed pension.

Goldson: We were told during budget hearings that residential tax bills would go up an average of \$18.

8:44: Jeffrey Kerekes and Rebecca Turcio sit down at the table to speak. Kerekes reads a letter from Jillian Robin Rausch: Personal property taxes for my office on Trumbull Street were raised arbitrarily. The tag sale value of my office contents is \$1200. The city assessed it at over \$11,000. Also my son's car was demolished but the city is still taxing him for it.

Now Kereke's own thoughts: What about the audit report on marshals? We keep hiring people who are abusing the citizens of New Haven. Also, the tax assessor's office is getting rid of some people. I've been told that these people are being removed because they went to a strip club during work hours. We're led to believe they're getting rid of people for better customer service.

Turcio: I'm asking all of the aldermen, all of you represent the city. The mayor said he won't do anything against O'Brien. We're asking for him to be severely reprimanded or terminated. I think that all the aldermen need to make something happen with this situation.

8:51: Rose Samino says, sarcastically, "Mr. O'Brien has done an absolutely wonderful job." If he is short-staffed, as has been said, then he has worked very diligently to find every loophole and apply it. My problem began last July when I got my tax bill. I represent a bakery. The equipment doubled in assessment. "How could this be? ... It's supposed to decrease." In 2007 it was \$82,000. In 2008 it went up to \$172,000. The 2009 bill I can't figure out. I was told there was an audit. I was told the city had never received a disclosure statement. My CPA sent the papers to me. My husband went down to the office and was treated very poorly by the assessor's office. He's quoted in the Advocate this week. Our disclosure paper was sent Oct. 2008, in advance of the deadline in November. It came out that the hike was not because of any audit, but because there wasn't a stamp on the disclosure form.

8:58: Craig Vilchay from West Haven speaks in support of the People's Center. He says: My time there began in the '60s when I was a panther trainee. The center is "sort of a second home to me."

9:00: Gwen Mills of the New Haven Labor Council says the center is an important part of the New Haven labor movement. It's a wonderful resource for the community, that makes no profit.

9:03: Linda Vinnoni of 52 Front St. says she has been in the city for 12 years. She speaks as vice-president of, 1199, the Yale hospital workers union in support of the People's Center.



9:08: Vice-Chair Blango calls up all remaining supporters of the People's Center to come up. About a dozen people approach.

9:10: Alfred Marder, president of the organization that owns the building that houses the center, says the

People's Center opened in 1937. Since then activists and organizers in the civil rights, labor, and other progressive social movements have used the center for meetings, without charge. A visit to the building would have verified that there is no business being done there. The tax code says the property would have to be used for profit to be required to pay taxes.

Goldson: What are they trying to tax you now?

People's Center treasurer: \$3,300. We went through the appeals process and our taxes were reduced to a portion of the original they had asked for.

Marder: We left assured that we were tax exempt and there would be no bill. Three days later we received a bill.

Treasurer: I recently retired from the state comptroller's office. The attitude of the assessor's office is casting all city employees in a bad light. If they need more help in the office, they should say so.

Hugh Baron, representing Locals 35 and 35 and the Graduate Student Employees Association, reads a letter of support for the People's Center.

Other supporters read similar letters.

9:10: Inez Bell, a 17-year-old, says she the People's Center has nurtured her creative expression and formation of political views. New Haven's youth "need as much support as we can get."

Bell's mom, D.J. Bell, says three generations of her family have used the People's Center. As a child, "I sat on Bobby Seal's lap. He was Uncle Bobby to me. I learned to make a fist from Angela Davis."

9:27: Blango says 40 names remain on the sign-up list to speak.

9:28: [The crowd has thinned out in here considerably. Some 30 or 40 people remain.] Fred Linton steps to the table: Firstly, My house grew from 2.5 to 2.75 stories in 2006, according to the assessor's office. It also gained square footage. The roof was recorded as slate, despite being asphalt shingles. Clapboards were described as shingles. I appealed. I had a preliminary interview with a single person. Later, I received a letter denying my appeal. Secondly, regarding the property tax increase for the elderly: I have received conflicting information on this. Thirdly, the back panel on the information pamphlet that accompanies tax bills has a typo in the URL given for paying taxes online—"paymetns.com." I visited that site and found I'd "picked up a Trojan" computer virus. "I don't know if this is a paid placement."

9:38: Cordelie Benoit: When people pay taxes, it's based on assessment and mill rate. The neighborhood I live in I would think would be an assessor's dream, because we have 20 houses exactly the same in the same condition. But the homes range in value from \$360,000 to \$270,000, according to the city. One house is bigger and has a parking space and has more land, but is assessed for less than smaller houses nearby. It's 30 years older, but in the same condition as other houses. All the houses were built in the 1800s. When I brought this information to the appeals board, I was told that three and four-family houses are always worth less. "There is chaos in the assessor's office in terms of fairness."

9:44: Joseph Valano has a small sign shop at 414 East St. in New Haven. He's been in business for 40 years. He says: I got a bill for \$10,000 in property. I was told that the assessor went to my website and found that 'you're bigger than you said you were.' "I said, 'You're a goddamn liar.' I don't have a website."

9:47: Norbert Church, a tax appeals attorney at 35 Elm St., says: I have a commercial client with cellphone antennas on his or her building. There was a change in the assessment of antennas to be considered as property. My client received a tax bill for \$18,000 plus penalties plus interest, with no prior notice. I appealed in March and never received a notice of a hearing. "It's been completely frustrating. I am completely in limbo." These antennas have been there for years. They're on all the assessment cards as part of the building. So we're being taxed doubly. The antennas are assessed as part of the real property and part of my client's personal property.

9:52: Fereshteh Bekhrad steps up. She's a [developer](#) who lives on Quinnipiac Avenue. She says: We filed a tax appeal for a number of units because they are smaller than the assessor claims. We also appealed assessments in 2006 because the properties were never visited by the assessors office. We made agreements, but O'Brien refused to honor them. So far it has cost us \$20,000 over and above what we are paying in legal fees. We are losing money on these properties, based on what we can rent them for. The apartments have fallen into disrepair and are no longer an asset. I have invested millions of dollars of my own into this development. The city has suffocated development.



10:03: A woman in a flowered dress struggles up to the table, using a cane. She says she was a victim of a hit and run accidents. "This was worth the pain and the wait." She says: Listening to all the testimony, "my heart feels like it's going to come out of my chest." I was a community activist under Mayor Dick Lee. I bought a home on Kensington Street. I have to pay almost \$8,000 for a two-family house. "I've beat two foreclosures." "This is wrong. Everything I've heard here tonight is wrong." "My mom told me this town was going to become a ghost town. ... because of the politics and propoganda and the trickery and the robbery and the lies." I've know Mr. O'Brien since 1999. He has not gotten the help that he needs. "No one person can do this job. He needs help." He is lashing out at people, because he's overworked. "He's just a human being he's not a machine." I beat my foreclosure too times, but it's not the mortgage. With the taxes, I'm up to \$1829 a month. In 1999 I was paying \$600 a month. And I can't get a cop when someone's getting killed. ... "When are we going to wake up and work together." "This is terrible." I was almost ashamed to come up here and say I'm from New Haven. But I'm not. Real New Haveners wouldn't do this. ... I haven't seen people come together like this in New Haven in a long time. ... Why do you take all this money from people?

10:17: Valerie King is next. She lives in Woodbridge but owns two properties in New Haven and is a real estate broker. She says: Taxes are killing real estate in New Haven. "It's outrageous." Whalley Avenue: Staples is gone. Shaw's is gone. "Where are the answers?" Where is the tax money going to come from? I implore this committee to come up with a better solution than just to raise taxes. [These speakers are getting pretty far afield here. This sounds more like one of the budget hearings from a couple months ago. Why aren't the aldermen reining in these speakers and asking them to speak to the issue of problems with tax assessment collection in New Haven, not the overall budget picture?]

10:25: The last supporters of the People's Center approach. After two speakers, spoken-word poet Baud Bidon begins his testimony in the form of free-verse poetry. He says: I run a spoken-word poetry venue at the People's Center. Poetry saves peoples lives at the center. If I had a job and made a mistake, I'd get fired. It wouldn't take 100 people to call for me to be fired.

10:38: Curtis Packer, co-owner of Bru Cafe, sits to speak: This is my third time here. I have a tax-exempt file, even though I'm a business. Maybe I should join forces with the People's Center. At the last meeting, O'Brien agreed to meet with us before the 25th of last month. He was on vacation the day after. We have tried to contact him. We've had no answers. He said he'd have a meeting. We've already filed one suit. I'm asking forgiveness on my taxes.

Smart: I'd like to apologize that you haven't been contacted. No one from City Hall has contacted you? I spoke with Elizabeth Benton and Mark Petrisimone and they failed to respond.

Packer: We certainly can't afford the tax that's due. I don't think I fall into the mayor's newest plan. "To be honest we're probably going to have to close in August. ... The city's going to lose another business. ... That's where we are."

10:43: That's it for public testimony! Four hours of testimony have come to an end.

On to the agenda items:

Alderman Robinson-Thorpe sits to face the committee. She says she's here on behalf of her sister, Edna Mae Caldwell, for whom she is requesting a veteran's credit.

10:49: Drew King is looking for a refund on his car taxes for 2007 and 2008. [See his comments at 7:48 p.m.]

10:53: Carl Reynolds says he is asking for forgiveness of automobile tax. He says: I owe over \$1812.92 in interest. I've been incarcerated for 8 years. I did my time. I admitted guilt. Today I'm an ordained minister and an employment specialist at the Columbus House. I've made eight job placements since May. I only finished parole last month. ... I'm just asking for the forgiveness of the interest.

11:00: Smart calls up tax collector Maureen Villani. They discuss a plan to waive the interest and make installment payments on the principal, without interest accruing for six months.

11:06: Michelle Gay is requesting an abatement on her car taxes. Smart sits next to her to address the committee. He says she paid her car taxes in Stratford but was mistakenly billed in New Haven. She says she has no idea how the assessor's office determined she lived in New Haven. Her fiance lived in New Haven and she visited him. She was told her license plate was scanned.

11:14: The Greater Dwight Development Agency is called, but no representative is here to speak. The item is moved to the next meeting's agenda.



11:15: Alfred Marder (with mic in photo) of the People's Center steps up again. The center is asking for forgiveness of a \$3,011.35 tax bill.

11:16: The public portion of the meeting is now closed. Bill O'Brien is still sitting in the gallery, taking notes.

11:17: Now, voting. Item 1, Thorpe's sister, needs more information. Voting delayed.

Item 2, Drew King. Blango: King has no means to pay. His request passes unanimously.

11:23: Item 3, Carl Reynolds. He gets six months to pay his taxes, interest free, and his interest is waived.

11:26: Item 4, Michelle Gay. She gets her request. Westville Alderman Greg Dildine stands up in the gallery to ask if there can be some check to make sure people aren't paying car taxes twice.

11:28: Item 5, the People's Center. Smart: It's a non-profit. That speaks for itself.

Dildine: Is this a one-time discussion, or an overall decision on their status?

Smart: This is about a forgiveness of one tax bill.

Castro: But we need to send a message to the tax office.

Smart: That's going to be part of the overall conversation on justification on a lot of things.

Jackson-Brooks: They didn't ask for their tax-exempt status be reinstated? If not, then the same thing could happen next year. ... We're going to have a whole bunch of folks in similar situations: erroneously put in the wrong tax category.

Smart: What's before us right now is forgiveness of this year's taxes.

The item passes unanimously. Taxes forgiven.

11:37: Blango calls assessor Bill O'Brien, Comptroller Mark Peitrosimone, and corporation counsel Victor Bolden.

Smart: Obviously, we have some serious problems here. One thing that's a disappointment to my constituents was the senior tax freeze. They're more confused from the letters than before the letters went out. If the assessor makes a mistake, the first thing that should be done is that the aldermen should be contacted. Then there should be a press conference and the aldermen should be there. Then give people a reasonable amount of time to respond. Taxpayers were not given enough time. One woman, an 85-year-old woman, she probably has a net income of \$100 a month. Every cent makes a difference. Mistakes need to be explained. I don't see that happening. The assessor needs to communicate with the public. The office needs to have the credibility and the respect of the taxpayers. What happened to communication?

[About 15 people remain in the chamber watching this.]

Pietrosimone: The elderly freeze has nearly 400 taxpayers who saw an increase in their tax bill. An inconsistency in the way the taxes were figured over the last several years caused them to receive an additional benefit. Their taxes were lower than their freeze amount. Now 375 people have seen some kind of correction, resulting in an increase. The average increase was \$425. We've gotten about 90 calls. We've managed to speak with 50, 48 are happy. The other two want to fire everyone in the city. ... We broke down the 394 affected seniors by ward. [Pietrosimone holds up a spreadsheet.] There are also four groups, each with slightly different circumstances. We sent out four different letters of explanation, one for each group. Group B = 15 people. Group C = 9 people. Those 24 taxpayers received revised bills and explanations. Group D = 227 taxpayers. They all came in the initial year of the program in 2005. Over the course of the years, their tax was configured using an inconsistent approach.

11:54: Goldson: How did this happen? How did the taxes get reduced erroneously?





Pietrosimone (at left in photo): The two biggest issues were base year errors—the wrong base year was used—also, the tax was being figured “off the net side, not the gross side.”

Goldson: You said most people walked away happy.

Pietrosimone: No, satisfied.

Paca: “I’ve been sitting her for about six hours. I’ve heard a lot and I’ve learned a lot.” What concerns me is the human factor. “I was thinking back in antiquity, when a man disgraced their families or their professions, they cried mea culpa, they said i’m sorry in other cases they did worse things to themselves.” Do you feel that you’ve made mistakes? Do you feel that the people of this committee are owed an apology? Are the people of New Haven owed an apology?

O’Brien (at right): I’m not aware of any time we were asked to come here and failed to do so. I believe I’ve always come here whenever asked to do so. It’s not accurate to say that I haven’t. I’ve always been here, as difficult or uncomfortable as it may have been. I give a lot of recognition to the concerns voiced here tonight. Frankly, a lot of it—taxes and the economic burden thereof is an emotional thing. I don’t want to get into specifics. There was a lot of inaccuracies that I observed. Maybe people get me confused with other people. What we are going to do to address it: start a complaint log, customer courtesy cards, audio and video recordings in the office, monitoring of calls, so people get a truer accurate record of what happened. Some people said they were hung up on. That’s not exactly correct. I tell staff to terminate a call if it gets hostile and vulgar. I have voicemail. Some of the messages people claimed were there, were not. I don’t think that anything was done incorrectly. I did make notes.

Paca: But do you feel responsible to the many people that called me to complain about their experience.

O’Brien: I’m sorry if any of that occurred and there were those misperceptions and I and my staff will endeavor to do better.

12:08: Smart: How do you make changes without consulting the aldermen? To have all these great cameras and customer service cards and smiley faces and there’s no input from the board and the whole fact-finding portion of this, isn’t over, how do you justify that?

O’Brien: I have been taking notes. We can continue to discuss. We can always improve.

Blango to Bolden: I would love a reasonable explanation for why so many businesses and non-profits have been miscategorized. How do we justify some of this stuff?

Bolden: Let me say how my office interacts with the assessor’s. It doesn’t come to my office until it gets to Superior Court. With respect to non-profits, I’ve been asked by the mayor to do a review. The People’s Center issue is not whether or not it’s a non-profit. The issue is that they charge rent. ... There are legal issues of valuation. The assessor’s office has to do it on the front end, my office gets involved in the back end. We’d like to get us involved sooner.

Blango: Some of it is common courtesy. Getting out there and looking at the properties. We’ve got a lot of lawsuits.

Bolden: I agree with you. We need to have someone in house. We need more staffing. But we’re going to look into this more.

Blango: I’m overwhelmed. We’re fussing over paperwork.

12:18: Smart: There are 56 lawsuits filed to this date. Without doing research, you’ve got to look at that and say this has got to stop. Even if we won half of them, it’s costing us money. Have you looked at that? How much

does it cost the city? We're here for six hours because we want answers. Respect my committee.

Bolden: You respect me.

Smart: How much money has been cost? Have you looked at that? Yes or no.

Bolden: I'm not answering yes or no.

Smart: [Cuts him off.]

12:21: Goldson: It seems like we're not using common sense here. With all due respect to Mr. O'Brien, this is the mayor's problem. Packer was told "we will meet shortly," then he calls and O'Brien is on vacation. ... Sending a letter to a business and saying didn't file it's non-profit status is not good business. We haven't shown trust to these people. It's not about misconceptions. It's about real people. Real issues. Real concerns. Maybe we ought to say we made a mistake, sorry. And now we have to subpoena the members of the tax appeals board. Where have the misconceptions occurred? Packer's coffee shop is not a non-profit and now he has to go to court and deal with that?

Bolden: Misconceptions is a mischaracterization of my testimony. When there are mistakes we deal with it.

Goldson: Why is that gentleman going to court. Why does he need to prove he's a business in court.

Bolden: His attorney hasn't contacted me. I can't contact him.

Goldson: We've been told at several meetings that the buck stops with O'Brien. He says they go to court.

Bolden: If I learn about it, I can do something about it.

Goldson: It looks so incompetent. Like the People's Center, you'd could just drive by there and see they're not in the business of being in business.

Jackson Brooks: There's a piece missing here. You get a letter back from the appeals board and the only option is going to court? How does a person know that they can access you?

Bolden: There's a resource question of how many we can address.

Castro: I'm very very upset. The part that really burns me is all those people suing and us not even acknowledging. The arrogance towards this whole process really concerns me. People can't even understand the process to defend themselves. This is totally unacceptable. I'm not going to believe anything other than what the taxpayers tell us.

12:34: DePino: Can we waive the interest for seniors who have trouble paying their higher bills by Aug 1.

Goldson: Can we not raise the taxes at all? It's an average of \$400 and it's 400 people. We give Tweed more than that. How much more revenue do we get from that?

Pietrosimone: I don't know.

Goldson: Do we have the authority to freeze the taxes at the mistakenly lower level?

Bolden: In perpetuity? You probably could do it with an ordinance.

Pietrosimone: It would be unfair to the other 500 people in the program that weren't affected by the mistake and have been paying the higher amount.

Goldson: OK. We can have that debate. The question is can we do it?

Bolden: With an ordinance it could be done.

Goldson: That would just get rid of this problem.

Pietrosimone: You're creating another problem. The other people would complain.

12:40: Jackson-Brooks: There's something wrong here and we don't want to own up to it. The way we are handling the people in this community. It's almost like we don't acknowledge this happened. Like it's a bunch of hogwash. It's not going to go away. The frustration is all over the place. Now we're going to change the system without dealing with the underlying issues. I just can't believe that we all didn't kind of hear the same thing. It's really bothering me. I can't believe that we sit here and hear all this and now we're just going to put in audio

and other things.

Goldson: What about the new members to the board of appeals. Who's responsible for the training? I still don't know who's responsible for managing the board of appeals.

Pietrosimone: My office is going to help out with the administrative side.

Bolden: My office will do training in terms of Freedom Of Information Act.

Goldson: So there's no party responsible for managing them once they're appointed by the mayor. I'm just trying to figure out who to blame. Somebody didn't keep track of those people.

Smart: I think it's a black eye of the city. I'm sad as a chairman that I have to sit here and argue with corp counsel. I would want to know from my attorney, when I'm getting a bunch of lawsuits, what's going on. Why do we have 56 lawsuits? I'm concerned. ... Please work out the situation with Curtis Packer.

O'Brien: His lawyer contacted my June 24th, I responded to him that very day. They never responded to that. He shouldn't have gotten a note saying he was a non-profit. It didn't come from the assessor's office. I was willing to go to his place.

Goldson: He wouldn't want that. His assessment would go up.

O'Brien: That does happen.

12:54: DePino says she wants to put in a motion to waive the interest for seniors who get new increased tax bills but are unable to pay them by Aug. 2nd. That item will go up for Unanimous Consent at the Aug. 2 meeting of the Board of Aldermen.

Meeting adjourned.

1:00: The lights just went off in the aldermanic chamber, leaving everyone in the dark. Apparently they're on a timer, because we are a sustainable city.

Comments

posted by: NotforNothing on July 26, 2010 8:53pm

For the 8 unit income property at 70 Lawrence Street, Vision Appraisals lists an April 2006 sales price of \$1,125,000. (about \$140,000/unit, which each average over 1100sqft.)

So the \$780,000 assessment, (meant to be 70% of the actual value of the property on 10/1/06), is pretty much dead on.

That, and the city tax collector's office lists 70 Lawrence Street's annual tax bill as \$19,371.

So much for Mr. Riggione's credibility!

posted by: robn on July 26, 2010 9:20pm

Code of Ordinances, New Haven CT

TITLE I CHARTER

ARTICLE V. THE MAYOR

Sec. 11. Powers.

(c) **The mayor may at any time whenever he may believe any person appointed to office** by him or any of his predecessors **to be incompetent, or unfaithful to the duties of his office**, or that the requirements of the public service demand his removal, summon said officer before him at a place and time specified in said summons to show cause why he should not be removed from said office. With said summons he shall leave with said officer a written statement of the charges against him, and if, after a full hearing, he shall find that such officer is incompetent or unfaithful, or that the requirements of the public service demand his removal, he may **remove such person from his office**;

posted by: robn on July 26, 2010 9:23pm

NOTFORNOTHING

You see no problem in basing assessments on purchase prices had during the biggest aberrant runaway peak in housing prices in history?

posted by: pat on July 26, 2010 9:57pm

Tonight the people of New Haven turned out and documented a sad history of arbitrary tax assessments, tax increases and rude treatment for those who dared to question either.

Many of the stories were worthy of Franz Kafka.

Is anyone listening?
