

Commissioner Q & A January 14, 2015

Senior Property Tax Exemptions - Part 2

Q. If Seniors were exempt from paying property taxes to schools, who would make up the difference?

A. It would mean that the property taxes of every non exempt homeowner and property owner would have to increase. There is no free lunch, so to speak. The school and the county government require a certain amount of money to operate no matter who pays it. If you exempt a certain group of people from paying property taxes, then it is simple; those remaining must pay more to make up for those who are exempt. In the case of our county with 30.7% of the population being over the age of 65, all those property taxes would fall on the younger people to pay and while many are working, there are many of them who are barely making it as it is because the pay scale in our county is relatively low compared to the counties in other areas giving these exemptions.

Q. Why should seniors not want to pay for schools and the education of our youth when we all know that educating our public is what helps make our great quality of life possible in the mountains?

A. With some it might be a desire to increase useable income, and for some it could certainly help with the budget. Personally, I have not had more than a couple of people ask me about this in the past year, so I do not think it is a wide spread issue, but others have indicated to me they have heard some conversation about this.

Q. Wouldn't the senior property tax exemption help those seniors who are having a difficult time making it on just their social security income?

A. I agree that there are some people that are struggling financially of all ages, but we really have no way to know exactly who they are and how many. It is natural that the younger ones are suffering financially the most. We do not know of one single senior who is losing their home because of the property taxes they have to pay. We do know that some struggle with all their bills, and when notified, the Tax Commissioner's office lets them set up payments to help make it work better with their budget. However, in most cases, those who have smaller incomes often have smaller and less expensive homes whose values have often depreciated down helping make their property taxes much lower. This is not to say many do not struggle, but in trying to help a very few, it is very difficult if not impossible, to be completely fair other than the way it is currently done.

Q. Do you think this senior property tax exemption is a bad idea?

A. When you ask me what we will accomplish in 2015, which will be a lot as you can tell from the past couple of articles, and at the same time want to consider removing a major part of our tax base, I will admit to you that it is troubling. If we start "tax shifting" it could completely change what our county is doing and would be able to do in the future. What makes Union County such a special place is that everyone pulls together and that is the only way our school taxes remain relatively low and the only way the county taxes remain low.

Part 3 Con't next week