

What it costs to live in the Back Mountain

TAX MILLS	MUNICIPAL COUNTY 1992 proposed	SCHOOL	TOTAL MILLS	1992 BUDGET	POPULATION	SPENDING PER PERSON	
DALLAS BOROUGH							
	14	61	158	233	\$444,998	2,567	\$173.35
(% of taxes)*	6%	26%	68%				
DALLAS TOWNSHIP							
	6	61	158	225	\$1,081,000	7,625	\$141.77
(% of taxes)	3%	27%	70%				
KINGSTON TOWNSHIP							
	5	61	158	224	\$1,097,019	6,763	\$162.21
(% of taxes)	2%	27%	71%				
JACKSON TOWNSHIP							
	3.5	61	176	240.5	\$497,790	3,600	\$138.28
(% of taxes)	1%	25%	73%				
LEHMAN TOWNSHIP							
	14	61	176	251	\$438,819	3,076	\$142.66
(% of taxes)	6%	24%	70%				
HARVEYS LAKE BOROUGH							
	21.5	61	176	258.5	\$559,879	2,746	\$203.89
(% of taxes)	8%	24%	68%				
LAKE TOWNSHIP							
	9	61	176	246	\$213,425	1,924	\$110.93
(% of taxes)	4%	25%	72%				
FRANKLIN TOWNSHIP							
	8	61	158	227	\$182,317	1,414	\$128.93
(% of taxes)	4%	27%	70%				

Note: The Dallas School District Millage is 158, and Lake-Lehman's is 176 for the 1991-92 school year
 * May equal more than 100% due to rounding.

Tax rates

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New people, often adding new homes to the tax rolls. Dallas Township zoning officer Leonard Kozick estimates that for a period of 4 or 5 years, from about 1985 to 1989 about 50 new homes were built in the township each year. In this recessionary year, Kozick estimates that construction is down to 35 or 36 houses.

"In the past 12 years, assessment has almost doubled," said Kozick. In 1980, the township's total assessed value was \$12.7 million, now it is \$18.4 million. Kingston Township manager Jeffrey Box describes new development as subsidizing the older development because it won't need any work for a while.

In a time when taxes everywhere seem to be going up, Kingston Township's tax millage has been 5 mills since 1983, when it was reduced from 7 mills. Box expects the township to carry over a surplus of between \$100,000 and \$140,000 into 1992.

The township's population increased by 228 people, or 3.49% in the 1980s. More importantly, according to the township's zoning and health officer Benjamin Gorey, between 30 and 35 new homes are built in the township each year.

While the recession may have slowed the building somewhat, in the long run the building boom in Kingston Township is likely to continue for quite a while. According to Gorey, the township currently has 267 lots ready to be built upon in already approved subdivisions, and another 81 lots in proposed subdivisions.

Kingston Township's home-rule form of government also gives it one other major budgetary advantage; it can collect a full 1% percent earned income tax instead of 1/2% like other municipalities. The earned income tax is the township's major revenue producer, and is expected to bring in \$825,000 in 1992.

"I would say that is more fair because it is based on ability to pay," says Box of the tax.

In contrast, an aging community like Plymouth Borough, with one of the highest tax rates in Luzerne County at 48.6 mills, has to borrow \$40,000 from the bank along with a \$150,000 tax anticipation loan to make ends meet. Instead of growing, the township lost 6.19% of its population in the 1980s.

Even in the Back Mountain, Dallas Borough a community with little room to grow is facing a bare bones budget. From 1980 to 1991, the assessed value of the township grew only 22.7%, instead of the 40 or more percent most other Back Mountain communities experienced.

Though taxes were kept at 14 mills, council president Donald Cooper was prompted to say, "This is a very lean budget. It will work only with prudent management, a

bolt of lightning and an act of God," when Dallas Borough's council passed their budget in November.

Why zoning and planning?

New development is not without its drawback.

Too much development, of the wrong kind, in the wrong place can hurt the environment, cause dangerous traffic or strain water resources.

"I think there's a need for zoning," said Mark Corgan, a partner with his brother Michael Corgan in Corgan Contracting. "The Poconos are a prime example of an area that was overdeveloped. The environment has really suffered."

And though Corgan says that no one wants to deal with the hassles, "if you look at the long term, zoning is good for both the contractor and the home owner, because it protects the property values."

And from the municipalities' point of view, "the controls are what actually contribute to the quality," said Gorey. "If we didn't have the specifications, I'm sure they'd be putting down half an inch of blacktop over dirt (on new roads) and they'd be broken up in a year for the township to fix."

Kingston Township is in the process of updating its comprehensive plan, which will take about six months. According to Dr. Martin Brotter, the consultant who is updating the plan, the study will determine traffic patterns to decide if any road improvements are necessary, determine what areas are suitable for which type of development, and discover if improvements are needed for community facilities.

Kozick said that municipalities also try to avoid situations like

Dallas Township has with Shaver Street, which was put in more than 50 years ago, before the township had any planning ordinances. The street ends in a dead end and there's no space to turn around, which means the township had to get a private landowner's permission to turn around their vehicles.

Adrian Merolli, executive director of the Luzerne County Planning Commission, says that planners are doing what they've always done, but public awareness of planning has increased.

"You go back fifteen years ago. I'd have a lot of meetings and no one would show up," said Merolli. Merolli stresses that when the planning commission makes its recommendations, its not what is being proposed, so much as where it being proposed.

Today the public is concerned with planning issues.

The rezoning for the Deer Meadows subdivision in Dallas Borough in 1988 drew a lot of public protest, as did a proposal early this year to develop Hanson's Amusement Park into a site for townhouses.

"I think everybody has a greater awareness of these issues," said Merolli. "I think that's a good trend."

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New homes

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tax bill go up some. Anstett added that "you cannot have a tremendous windfall of tax dollars overall. The millages are dropped accordingly. The purpose of reassessment is to equalize valuation."

Because reassessment is not required by state law, county commissioners rarely undertake it because for politicians, reassessment spells "political suicide."

Just ask Eric Brown, chief assessor for Wyoming County, where a general reassessment was conducted in 1988.

"The equity or uniformity aspect was way out of hand," said Brown. Before 1988, Wyoming County's last reassessment had been in 1962.

Brown calls the public reaction to reassessment "extremely unpopular."

The public took their wrath to the polls. Of the three county commissioners, one decided to not run for reelection. The other two were defeated handily.

Anstett estimates that if Luzerne County were to reassess its 143,000 properties, it would cost about \$50 a property, or roughly \$7 million, and take two to three years to complete.

Brown adds however that once a county is reassessed once, periodic reassessments would be faster and cheaper because much of the information would already be entered into a computer

system.

And says Brown, if the state mandated reassessment, it might mean state funding for the job besides taking pressure off of county commissioners.

State Representative Phyllis Mundy said that she sees two problems with periodic reassessments. One, they are expensive, and two, she would rather see taxes based upon ability to pay such as an earned income tax.

As president of the area branch of the League of Women Voters, she supported 1988's tax reform proposal which was badly defeated. The proposal provided incentives for property reassessment and an earned income tax. The tax reform proposal also provided a Constitutional Amendment which would have allowed residential and commercial property to be taxed at different rates to make up for the fact the commercial establishments would not be paying an earned income tax.

"If we're going to continue to rely on property taxes to fund education and other things, we need periodic reassessment," said Mundy, who added that the elderly and those on fixed incomes are bearing a tax load they may not be able to pay now. "Property is no longer the sign of wealth that it used to be."

Hasay will move his district office to Mountaintop

Rep. George C. Hasay said recently that he is moving his district office to 369 South Mountain Blvd. in the Grouse Hill Center, on Route 309, Mountaintop.

Hasay said that he has moved his office from the Sans Souci Parkway because the Legislative Reapportionment Commission removed Hanover Township from his district.

"I am relocating my office to better serve the constituents that I have and hope to have in the newly-drawn district," Hasay said. "The district will now include half of Bear Creek Township, three precincts in Plains Township which borders Bear Creek Township, Denison Township, Hollenback Township, Nescopeck Township, Penn Lake Borough and Black Creek Township."

"The office, off Route 309 will be easily accessible to most residents of the district, particularly the growing Mountaintop community."

Hasay said the district will be the largest in the area in the county. He is installing a computerized phone system which will permit most of his constituents to call toll-free. There will be a telephone number for the 474 exchange (Mountaintop area), 474-2276; a number for the 542 exchange (Shickshinny area), 542-7345 and a number for residents from the Lehman area, 287-7505.

"The new 117th District will be predominantly rural," Hasay said.

"As always Shickshinny area residents may drop off items for processing by PennDOT and other state agencies at my dad's garage at Hasay Chevrolet," he said.

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