

Help From Queen's Park?

York Taxpayers Finding Bitter Pill In Mailboxes

There's a small dash of sweetness coming from Southern York County homeowners and tenants who have recently been swallowing two bitter pills.

The first bitter pill was market value reassessment which has swung a lot of the tax burden from some homes to others, and from industry to the shoulders of the homeowner.

The second bitter pill was increased tax levies by the York County Board of Education and most municipalities.

Still, a lot of taxpayers haven't looked at their tax bills yet, and haven't had their pills.

The dash of sweetness has come in a rather complicated new provincial formula which promises a tax reduction of up to \$15 this year and maybe a few dollars more next year.

The Department of Municipal Affairs calls its dash of sweetness "an amendment to improve the method of calculating this year's residential property tax reductions for homeowners and tenants."

"The amendment to the Residential Property Tax Reduction Act will ensure more equitable assistance to all eligible homeowners and tenants, particularly to residents of municipalities where the average tax burden is highest," said Municipal Affairs Minister Darcy McKeough.

He said guidelines will go to all municipalities as soon as possible so that they can make their tax reduction calculations.

The property tax rebates must be passed on to eligible homeowners and tenants by December 31, 1970.

The amendment provides a tax reduction consisting of a standard sum of \$30, plus 10% of the average residential tax paid by householders in 1969. This means that the majority of taxpayers will receive a greater benefit in 1970 than in 1969. However, there will be some taxpayers who received a greater degree of assistance than others in 1969, and whose tax reduction will consequently be less in 1970.

In order to avoid undue reduction in the amount of payment, the amendment insures that no taxpayer will lose more than \$5 in the rebate, as compared to 1969.

Similarly, there is a \$15 ceiling on the amount of the increase in tax reduction payable to any taxpayer. Proportionate adjustments will be made for householders and tenants who do not occupy their premises for all 12 months of 1970.

Existing provisions in the Residential Property Act state that no taxpayers will receive a tax reduction exceeding 50 percent of his taxes on any property.

To be eligible for a tax reduction, a tenant or homeowner must occupy a separately assessed dwelling.

Under the amended act, total payments will increase by 9% over 1969 to an estimated \$136,000,000 in 1970.

So even with the recent dash of tax sweetener, the phrase "market value reassessment" has come to mean more taxes. This is a feeling the Robarts government is trying hard to overcome.

Municipal Affairs Minister Darcy McKeough made two major moves in the Legislature prior to the Easter recess to ease the burden of tax reform under reassessment.

Mr. McKeough's department took over the job January 1 this year of reassessing all properties in Ontario, a five-year program designed to eliminate anomalies of the past and set up a more equitable level of rates between residential and commercial properties.

But York County has already gone over to market value assessment, as it had completed reassessment ahead of time.

Sudden changes in individual tax bills are being felt and many voters are suddenly realizing they're going to have to pay heavily. On the other hand, commercial property has not been hit, if the lack of complaints is any indication.

In his latest move, Mr. McKeough announced that municipal taxes based on market value will not be applied to any more homeowners before 1975. But this isn't going to help hard-hit taxpayers in York County.

For our homeowners who have already been assessed at burdensome high rates, Mr. McKeough announced short-term measures to spread their tax increases over several years.

The government told a recent provincial - municipal meeting that only one municipal reassessment will be completed in Southern Ontario within the next three years.

"We have learned some lessons for the reassessment that has gone on, and that is why we won't undertake any large reassessments. In fact, the only reassessment in Southern Ontario for the next three years will probably be Brampton," said Mr. McKeough.

Vaughan Township Reeve Garnet Williams said he was having a hard time trying to explain how an industry in the municipality, under provincial reassessment, had its taxes reduced by \$50,000 this year to \$100,000. In 1969 it paid taxes of \$150,000, he said.

Mr. McKeough said it will take two or three years to figure out what all the problems are in Vaughan Township. Also, at the meeting the government promised to take the strings off its grants to municipalities, so local councils can determine their own spending pro-

grams. Just exactly what will be done in the way of making the grants unconditional was not spelled out. And in the same breath the government made it clear there will be no dramatic increase in provincial assistance to municipalities. This was blamed on the federal government's tax sharing policies.

The results of these moves by the government haven't yet started to arrive in the homeowner's mailboxes. And the tax bills have.

Many must be thinking that Mr. McKeough's latest concern about reassessment birth pains can also be attributed to the government's reluctance to unduly disturb voters who may have to elect a government within the next year.

But the voters in the 170 municipalities (like those in York County) may already be put in the position where they are sure to be stirred up. The government may face at least a 170 municipality hornets' nest of trouble at the polls.

Premier Robarts has ruled out an election for this year, but chances are good that he will call one in 1971. This is particularly likely if the economy continues to stagnate under inflationary pressures.

Mr. McKeough justifies his moves by reminding everyone that it was inevitable that reassessment would lead to substantial increases in some cases. He says these inconsistencies in the 170 municipalities are the result of rates set by municipal

assessors, not the experts he is training this year for the province-wide job. His own team of assessors won't start evaluating properties until next year.

But here in York County the damage has been done. Every day the mailman delivers some more tax bills, then some more voters get their medicine. And the pills are bitter, even with a \$15 dash of sweetener.

NEWMARKET: A 15-year-old Srigley Street boy, Edward Brown, was killed April 19 when the borrowed bike he was riding was struck by a car driven by Kent Doner, 22, of Newmarket. The bicycle was bought by a friend who lived in the same home as he only two hours before the accident.

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