

Belmont voters worry that business tax exemption would shift costs to residents

By THOMAS P. CALDWELL, LACONIA DAILY SUN

BELMONT — It was not the budget that concerned the roughly 50 voters attending Belmont's deliberative session of Town Meeting on Saturday, but a proposal to encourage business investment by providing a partial exemption on property taxes.

Selectmen are proposing that the town adopt the provisions of RSA 72:81, a relatively new law that allows towns to count only half of the increased valuation from new business or industrial construction when assessing local town and school taxes. Adoption would not affect the state education tax or the county tax that businesses would pay, and the exemption for local taxes would not last beyond six years.

Several residents took the microphone to say they did not feel that would be fair.

Ken Knowlton said his concern with the arrangement is that there would be nothing to stop a business from leaving town after the exemption expired.

George Condodemetraky said it would be unfair to residents who do not get tax breaks when they improve their own property, and that the exemption would shift the cost of services onto local taxpayers. He added that, if a new industry created a need for greater capacity at the wastewater treatment plant or required a new pumping station on Route 140, the taxpayers would have to bear some of that cost.

"That's where the burden comes in," he said.

Resident Carmen Lorentz argued that the exemption would encourage business development to lower overall taxation.

"It's a break for a short period of time, in hopes that they'll move here, instead of somewhere else," she said.

Town Administrator Jeanne Beaudin said that, even though the town would be receiving only 50 percent of the increase initially, that still would be more than the town is receiving now.

Sheila Cunningham said, "It just bothers me as a taxpayer. Why are they they being exempted when everybody else in the room is not?"

Condodemetraky also objected to a planning board proposal to prohibit accessory dwelling units as additions to manufactured homes, recreational vehicles, "and where one or more single-family units are already attached, such as condominium developments and duplexes."

Condodemetraky said he understood the prohibition for recreational vehicles, but he pointed out that many people live in manufactured homes and said they might want an addition to accommodate a relative, rather than sending that relative to a nursing home. He argued that denying an addition to them but allowing it for other homeowners would be discriminatory.

Several others agreed, but Moderator Steve Nix Jr. pointed out that proposed zoning articles cannot be modified by voters at the deliberative session. Both that and the article on property tax exemptions will appear on the March ballot as presented.

Voters would have been able to adjust the budget figure before it goes onto the March ballot, but there were no questions and no discussion on the \$7.6 million operating budget. Instead, they focused on a proposed \$65,000 appropriation for a space needs and feasibility study which involved no new taxation because the money would come from a capital reserve fund already established.

Some voters questioned the amount, pointing out that the Lakeshore Redevelopment Planning Commission asked for only \$50,000 for comprehensive strategic planning for the former Laconia State School property, a much larger project.

Lorentz, who serves on the Belmont Facility Strategy Committee, said the Laconia study is a preliminary report to determine the direction to take, and that there will be many more-expensive studies before there is a concrete proposal for the State School property. Belmont's study, she said, is to come up with a specific plan to address town building needs.

"We have a hodgepodge of buildings," she said, "and we don't have any idea of what we need overall."

She said the past studies that have been done never addressed the overall needs of the town, "which is why we've been paralyzed for so many years. We need to move forward as a town."

Condodemetraky said past efforts have failed because "it was mismanaged by people who were not professionals. This will have professionals, and that \$65,000 to develop a plan is a small price to pay to get on track."

Donna Hepp, who has spearheaded the effort, said, "We can build from the existing studies. ... We need to come up with something the citizens, staff, and contractor can agree on."

Rep. Michael Sylvia cited his experience with the county correctional center, which originally was proposed at \$45 million.

"We spent \$160,000 on a development plan, and ended up scrapping it, and we got an \$8 million facility," he said.

Lorentz responded, "We don't have an agenda, and I don't appreciate the implication that we do from Rep. Sylvia. What we want to do is provide people with options. We don't have a plan in mind for the outcome."

Resident Beth Anderson commented, "There are so many times I've been here to hear proposals, and finally somebody's doing something about it."

Voters ended up leaving the article alone, so it will go on the ballot as proposed.

The deliberative session ended with no changes to the warrant. Voting takes place March 13