

MAYOR'S COLUMN

This week's column is a compilation of activities and projects that occurred in the Village in February.

Of great importance was the annual tax grievance night last week. In comparison to last year, the Village saw a 30% drop in the number of grievances filed.

This is in stark contrast to the experience in most Westchester communities. Larchmont and Mamaroneck experienced a doubling of grievances and many other municipalities increased between six and ten-fold. This was a result of their old, inaccurate valuation numbers being plugged into the State assessment formula during an economic downturn resulting in very skewed valuations.

Keeping the Village's assessment role as current and accurate as possible has been a high priority of our government and the numbers reflect that. Our COD (coefficient of dispersion) or error factor is below 10%, which is considered the gold standard in this industry. We did an in-house comparison of assessed values to current fair market sales of homes and we also hired an outside expert to verify our results. We are the only community I am aware of that had its internal calculations independently checked. Both studies concluded that assessments in the Village by and large reflect fair market value.

Though the aggregate number of grievances were down appreciably, we still see many from our co-ops. Given that New York State law protects co-ops quite generously in how taxes are calculated vs. single family homes and that the Village revaluation resulted in very fair values, I believe the constant filing of grievances borders on greed and is a real detriment to our Village and fellow taxpayers. I ask co-op boards to reconsider signing on with attorneys who ask for no money down but a split of the proceeds should they be able to convince a judge to tweak what are already very fair values.

February was also a month of meetings. I, along with other mayors in southern Westchester County, met with County Executive Astorino to discuss community priorities. On my agenda on behalf of the Village was the need to greatly downsize the bloated County government; lobby to require that

County employees make healthcare contributions similar to those made by our Village employees; institute a joint purchasing mechanism at the County level so individual municipalities can achieve volume discounts and economies of scale; and, to assist us in dealing with the exorbitant rate increases proposed by United Water. This was the first time in the five years I have been Mayor that the County Executive ever sought out an opinion from the Village so I take it as a good sign.

Mr. Porr and I also attended the Mayors and Managers Conference in Albany and while it was very positive to share ideas and concerns with our Westchester colleagues and local elected officials, those in the top echelons of State government seem to be operating a rudderless ship with no State budget on the horizon.

I also attended a morning meeting discussing the Affordable Housing Plan. The original implementation plan drafted by the County was rejected by the HUD appointed monitor so things continue to remain at a muddled standstill.

Our Citizens' Advisory Committee met mid-month and neighborhood representatives continue to be a positive force for change. Some of the topics discussed included the impact of the school budget, the recent bank robbery, snow removal procedures, street maintenance and the quality of lighting throughout the Village.

Due to the large quantity of snow needing removal last week, our Department of Public Works employees had to work round the clock, ultimately disturbing some of our residents. We will attempt to come up with a less intrusive procedure going forward, though ours is the norm in the County. We do operate under a great deal of constraints and pleasing each constituency is a constant balancing act.

As examples, our nineteen-man snow removal team is also the garbage and recycling staff who must be ready to do that second job early in the morning; union rules affect hours and overtime; some of our streets are snow emergency routes that require immediate cleaning; our business district must be cleaned while shops are not open so as not to hurt business and facilitate early morning deliveries; and, finally, many residents depend

on our cleaning their on-street parking places and our commuter lots as quickly as possible so they can get to work.

The County has finally commenced repair of the Palmer Avenue bridge damaged in a car accident almost one year ago. Neither the Village, nor Yonkers, were allowed to make interim repairs or even shovel causing a dangerous condition for pedestrians. Thankfully, the work is estimated to be completed in the next two to three weeks.

The Trustees and staff just finished devoting countless hours to a State audit that the Comptroller's Office said was instigated by a "taxpayer complaint" regarding the Village's Assessing Consultant's contract. I guess unbeknownst to the audit division this contract had been approved in another division of the very same Comptroller's Office.

It was probably the most wasteful and politicized exercise I have experienced since becoming Mayor. Sadly, thousands of Village tax dollars were wasted as well as your State tax monies to make recommendations such as the need to send out proposal letters to commence a public bidding process for exterminators if we see mice in the building and the recommendation that all professional services be put to bid, even though not required by State law, under the theory that the cheapest attorney will be the best. We strongly disagreed with much of the Comptroller's report and most importantly the motive for wasting all of our time and your money. I have requested a meeting with Comptroller DiNapoli to personally register my protest to what amounted to a fishing expedition.

I ask all residents to contact Village Hall directly if you have a problem with anything we are doing. By skirting the process and going behind the backs of the elected officials, we lose the opportunity to solve the problem expeditiously and without such a waste of time and taxpayer dollars.

Finally, Village elections will take place on March 16th from 6AM to 9PM at Village Hall. Two Trustee positions and one Village Justice slot will be determined. Absentee ballot requests that need to be mailed to you must be received by March 9th. If you come to Village Hall in person, ballots can be requested up until March 15th.