

Fluctuating bills frustrate residents

By Gerald McKinstry • gmckinst@lohud.com • April 4, 2010

When George Maniscalco looked at his property **tax bill** recently, he noticed his county share went up \$404 — far more than the 2.9 percent lawmakers approved.

"It was higher than I expected," the Pleasantville man said. "It all adds up."

For many taxpayers, the increases are adding up as 20 of Westchester's 25 cities and towns owe more to the county than they did in 2009, according to a preliminary county review of assessment rolls. Some places such as Mount Pleasant, which includes Pleasantville, owe much more.

Residents there can expect to pay an additional \$258, on average, for county services because of a projected 15.47 percent increase there while Harrison, Pelham and Mamaroneck are likely to see in the ballpark of a 6 percent increase.

Yonkers, Eastchester, Lewisboro, North Salem and Pound Ridge will likely see their county portions go down, despite lawmakers' approval of a \$1.8 billion budget that included a 2.9 percent tax levy increase.

Mount Pleasant Supervisor Joan Maybury said taxpayers are rightly concerned — officials there are hearing about the spike since they collect the bill, even though they have no control over the county portion.

"It's causing a lot of concerns for the taxpayer," Maybury said. "I think the overall feeling is that the tax levy can't go up. Everybody is saying we need lower taxes."

With the tattered and shaky economy, she said people seem to be paying closer attention to their **tax bills**, scrutinizing lines like the county, school, sewer and town portions like never before.

"I've never seen people look so closely," she said.

The county share makes up roughly 15 percent to 18 percent of a taxpayer's total bill.

Because the county does not collect warrants directly or assess property, Westchester sends each town and city a bill for its share of the county budget based on its share of total **property values** — the 2010 total is more than \$560 million.

Municipalities then use their own assessment formulas to apportion the county tax bill among their property owners.

A state formula, known as an equalization rate, is used by the county and school districts to figure tax bills for **homeowners** in municipalities with varying assessments. The rate is set by the state, so the county and municipalities have no control over that.

The system results in wide variations in county tax bills from year to year among municipalities. Taxes fluctuate depending on development, tax challenges, or certiorari s, and whether local assessment practices have changed, according to David Jackson, director of Westchester's Tax Commission.

County Executive Rob Astorino's office declined to comment.

This year Mount Pleasant had the largest upswing in its county share, while Yonkers residents in 2008 were hit with a 23 percent increase.

Some groups and leaders have equated the system to a lottery that is unfair and in need of reform through some sort of revaluation.

Others have argued revaluation will cost people more, isn't worth the expense and few leaders have the political will to take on the challenge. Curbing spending is the best way to control taxes, they say.

With a countywide reassessment, property owners actually would **pay taxes** based on their home's market value, not other rates that vary widely.

In the interest of fairness and certainty, the system needs to change, said Board of Legislators Chairman Ken Jenkins, a Yonkers Democrat who supports reforms.

"This is why collaborative assessment is so important to the people of Westchester," Jenkins said recently. "You shouldn't have some mysterious formula and come up with whatever it is."

The way Jenkins sees it, revaluation is happening one property at a time when owners contest their assessments. Municipalities paid out \$55 million in challenges while the county paid \$13 million in 2009, he said.

"This assessment thing has to get fixed," Jenkins said. "That's a way to deliver tax fairness, awareness and certainty."

Efforts to improve assessments records have begun as the county is paying for a

project to take photos of properties throughout Westchester. Having more uniform and updated records is expected to be an important part of any possible countywide reassessment.

Lowering taxes needs to be a priority, said Rocco Allessandro, a property manager in Mount Pleasant, who said the chronic uptick is bad for everyone — homeowners, business and senior citizens.

"The way things are going, I'm lucky they're still here," he said of tenants. "It's terribly expensive."