



Photos by Layla Garms

Attendees listen during Monday's meeting.

(Below) Joycelyn Johnson and John Burgiss discuss the particulars of the reassessment.



File Photo

After leaving Atkins High School, Carl Eller went on to become a legend.

Homes

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property value.

Among them was Watson's neighbor, Shirley Robinson, who said her two bedroom home's value has also plummeted.

"I moved there in 1983. The value was up to \$47,000. When I got this appraisal, it was down to \$12,000," said Robinson, a retired Housing Authority of Winston-Salem employee. "I'm not angry; I'm mad."

Burgiss said he and his team of tax assessors expected sharp declines because of the trouble the housing market has experienced since the last assessment was done in 2009.

Since the appraisals are based on sales of nearby houses with similar qualities, factors like foreclosures — though they are not directly included in the tabulation — can affect the sales of surrounding houses and cause a whole area to decline in value, Burgiss explained. The more sales that take place in a given area, the better picture an assessor is able to paint of the surrounding homes' value, so declines in the number of sales can also hinder the process, he said.

"What's different is the market," he said. "There are less sales for us to go by, and that creates a challenge. It makes the job more difficult and that's not an excuse, that's a reality."

Virginia Newell, a retired educator and former member of the Winston-Salem City Council, said she was incensed when she received the letter stating that her meticulously-kept three bedroom home was only worth \$34,000. She called the reappraisal "arbitrary and capricious."

"I couldn't build a doghouse for \$34,000," said Newell, a licensed realtor whose home value dropped nearly \$83,000 between 2009 and 2013. "...My house is solid. I've improved my house to no end."

Joycelyn Johnson, the longtime former City Council member for the East Ward, believes African American communities have been disproportionately affected by the reappraisal.

"The tax process disenfranchises many of our communities," declared Johnson, whose own property dipped by \$70,000. "It's not fair for those of us who are in Skyland Park to have \$50-, \$60-, \$70,000 lost."

Burgiss, who explained the assessment process to the residents at the meeting, said the same method is used to assess all properties in Forsyth County.

"There's no difference in our methodology. There's no difference in our strengths and weaknesses all across the county," said Burgiss. "...Appraisal by its nature is an opinion of value. It's an opinion. It's not a fact."

County Commissioner Walter Marshall said that the decrease in so many property values could translate to a significant drop in income for the county.

"I hope you don't think for one minute that the county wants to lose your money," Marshall told the group. "...We're talking about losing \$20-30 million. If there's any way possible for us to recoup that money, I think we'll do it."

Rev. Paul Lowe, pastor of Shiloh Baptist Church



and chair of the Forsyth County Democratic Party's Fifth Congressional District, told Witherspoon and Marshall that outrage is widespread.

"We have people that are alarmed at what has just taken place," Lowe said. "...There are some people who have lost 50-plus percent of the value of their homes."

Johnson, who has announced her intentions to run this year to regain her City Council seat, urged Marshall and Witherspoon, the only blacks and Democrats on the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners, to take action on behalf of their constituents.

"You can look at the maps and see where the disparities are — the maps clearly show that," she said. "...I suggest that you delay the process since you know things are getting better and you only have to do it (a reappraisal) every eight years."

Witherspoon admitted that the reassessment was cause for concern for both county leaders and residents.

"It's a shame," he said, referencing the throngs of homeowners who have lost equity. "I don't think anybody benefits."

Burgiss said conducting the assessment now is the most just option.

"It's all about equity. What's more important to me as an assessor is to be fair. That's what the property tax system is based on, fairness," he stated. "If you looked at what our values were in '09 and what they were selling for, our values were like 200 percent more. That would be, in a lot of people's minds, over-taxing. I want to reappraise because there's inequity."

The debate at the meeting Monday quickly became heated. Many of those present directed their frustration and anger at Burgiss and county leaders, questioning the Administration's methodology and vocalizing the negative impact the reassessment has already had on their lives. For city native Dr. Manderline Scales, a retired educator, it means that she won't be able to downsize from her four bedroom home to a smaller dwelling that better suits the needs of a single homeowner. For longtime city resident Clara Ellis, it means she won't be able to draw from the equity of her home to make improvements. Ellis, a great-grandmother, said she was "flabbergasted" to learn that the home she has occupied on Elbon Drive for more than five decades was assessed at \$37,600.

"That means if I want to improve it more, I couldn't even do it because nobody is going to give me money with it dropping like that," said the 85 year-old.

Even City Council Member Derwin Montgomery, who repre-

sents the city's East Ward, felt the effects of the reassessment, to the tune of \$80,000.

"I purchased my house almost two years ago and the value that they're giving for my house is not even close to what my mortgage is," said Montgomery, who added that he plans to appeal the decision. "I can understand the passion (homeowners expressed at the meeting). When people purchase a home, that is a lifetime investment ... and if these values are anywhere close to market value, you've wiped out people's wealth; you've wiped out the equity that they've put into their homes."

Montgomery said he and other residents expected declines in their property values because of the housing market's collapse,

but they never imagined it would be to the extent they have experienced. The Dreamland Park resident said he plans to explore the issue further during a community meeting today at First Calvary Baptist Church, where he serves as senior pastor. Montgomery said the group will be exploring "other options that we as a community can take in order to try to impede these values from sticking." Montgomery said he understands the community's frustration.

"I think people didn't expect what we're facing now and it needs to be addressed," he said.

Residents who have questions about their property revaluation are invited to attend a community meeting hosted by City Council Member Derwin Montgomery at First Calvary Baptist Church, 401 Woodland Ave., today (Thursday, Feb. 28), at 6 p.m. Forsyth County Commissioners Walter Marshall and Everett Witherspoon are slated to attend, as is Forsyth County Tax Assessor John Burgiss. For more information, contact Tabetha Bailey at 336-462-2341. Residents are asked to bring their tax and appeal forms with them to the meeting.

Eller to receive 'Hometown' honor

CHRONICLE STAFF REPORT

Carl Eller, a Pro Football Hall of Famer from Winston-Salem, will be honored Tuesday (March 5) at Atkins Academic & Technology High School.

Eller, one of the most honored defensive players of his time, was a standout on the gridiron when he attended the original Atkins on Cameron Avenue in the late 1950s. He went on to play at the University of Minnesota before being drafted by the Minnesota Vikings in 1964. Before retiring in 1979, Eller would also wear the uniform of the Seattle Seahawks.

His football accolades are vast and include six Pro Bowl and four Super Bowl appearances. He was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 2006 and the Pro Football Hall in 2004. Several years ago, Eller was also honored at the original Atkins for his contributions to the former school's athletic heritage.

Tuesday's program will be attended by current Atkins staff, faculty, students, alumni and Eller's friends and family. It is not open to the public. Atkins Principal Joe Childers will emcee the ceremony, during which a "Hometown Hall of Famer" plaque honoring Eller will be unveiled.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame and Allstate Insurance Company started the Hometown Hall of Famers program to honor the local roots of some of the sport's greatest coaches, players and contributors.

The plaque will permanently hang at the school to serve as an inspiration for students and athletes. HESSIE SMITH, one of Eller's former high school teammates, will assist with the unveiling. Organizers say a commemorative Eller road sign will also be erected in the city.

From left: Tony Humberly, B. Bishop, D. James, Harold A. Telford, Lewis Grant & Linnell Hill, Clarka Kline & Matt. P. Hester