

Homeowners pin hopes on lawmaker's revaluation legislation

BY TODD LUCK
THE CHRONICLE

The Ministers Conference of Winston-Salem and Vicinity has joined the call to action over the countywide dip in property values.

Ministers are supporting a multi-pronged plan that includes asking local residents to appeal their lowered revaluations to Forsyth County Tax Administration and supporting a bill by State Rep. Ed Hanes that would nullify the 2013 revaluations.

Hanes was unable to attend the ministers' media conference last Friday at Emmanuel Baptist Church, but his legislation was a main topic of conversation, earning the endorsement of not only the ministers, but Mayor Allen Joines, City Council Member Derwin Montgomery, County Commissioner Everett Witherspoon, N.C. Senator Earline Parmon and N.C. Rep. Evelyn Terry, all of whom joined the ministers Friday.

"All politics is local politics, and when we have as many of my constituents come to me as have been coming to me saying they need some action, I just felt this was the best course," said Hanes, explaining why he will file the bill.

If passed, it would allow residents of Forsyth and other counties to keep their 2008 appraisals until the next state-mandated revaluation in 2016. Counties are required to do revaluations every eight years, but many, like Forsyth, conduct them every four years. Forsyth Tax Administration officials blamed the still shaky housing market and economy for the low revaluations. Ninety-three percent of Forsyth County residents saw a drop in their property value. Many of those most severely affected live in minority communities. The lower property values could also translate to a \$16-19 million budgetary shortfall for the city and county.



Rev. Willard Bass speaks at last week's media conference.

Photos by Todd Luck

"We recognize our community is in a crisis," said Ministers Conference President Rev. Willard Bass.

The Conference helped to place volunteers at three city recreation centers Monday to help residents file appeals before the Tuesday, March 12 deadline.

Joines said he will be asking the Winston-Salem City Council to pass a resolution in support of Hanes' bill. He said he did not think the current reassessment accurately reflects home values.

"These last few years have clearly, across the country, been a very difficult time for our economy, particularly for home values, so I believe by moving the current appraisal cycle to the state minimum of eight years, we'll give the market a chance to catch up, if you will," said Joines.

County officials say that a number of factors are considered when appraising property, including the sale price of nearby



Rep. Hanes

homes. Konnoak Hills Community Association President Carolyn Highsmith, who spoke at the ministers' event, questioned the formula used.

Konnoak Hills, which she

described as a diverse community with equal ratios of white, black and Hispanic residents, saw its property values drop 25-35 percent. She questioned whether certain home sales should have counted in the reappraisal.

"To keep from losing their homes to foreclosure, many Forsyth County homeowners who were close to defaulting on their mortgages were forced, under duress, to sell their properties at severely depressed sale prices to real estate investors looking for short term gain," said Highsmith. "...I know for a fact that such duress sales have been counted as qualified sales in my Konnoak Hills community under this flawed 2013 tax reappraisal formula."

Yolanda Hairston, the Ministers Conference's volunteer coordinator for the tax appeals project, said that she conducted a comparison of homes in the

county and found that duress sales were being used in the revaluation, including in her own neighborhood, driving down property values severely.

"... People who have chosen to live in the homes that they have purchased are being penalized in the process," she said.

County Commissioner Witherspoon said he is unsure how Hanes' bill will fare in the Republican-led General Assembly, and, if it is passed, if his colleagues on the Forsyth County Board of County Commissioners would support using it, since some have already voiced their opposition to it.

"This is going to take a community effort," said Witherspoon.

The possibility of filing a civil suit to overturn the 2013 revaluations was also mentioned. The Ministers Conference said it was looking at its legal options on the subject.



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