

# Portsmouth Neighbors Appeal Assessments

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At a time when most home values are falling, an incredulous crowd of homeowners turned out Tuesday to challenge one of the biggest assessment spikes of any neighborhood in Hampton Roads.

Westbury residents saw their proposed assessments jump 30 percent or more, prompting a coordinated protest from the neighborhood. All but one of the 53 appeals to the city's Board of Equalization came from that area, City Assessor Maria Kattmann said.

One reason for the large increase: A previous city assessor had artificially discounted assessments in Westbury based on a consultant's advice, Kattmann said. She said she found nothing in state code that supported such a move, which was meant to be temporary.

"If there were, I would have abided by that," Kattmann said.

As a whole, Portsmouth's residential assessments fell on average about 4.4 percent this spring. Westbury, a community of new homes for first-time homebuyers with low to moderate incomes, in the County Street area near downtown, was one of five neighborhoods that saw an increase.

The jump there was by far the largest.

Kattmann said her office increased values in Westbury because assessments were running about 70 percent of what four comparable sales there went for in 2009.

The residents are basing their challenge in part on how the neighborhood is geographically defined by the assessor's office. Ryan Greiner and others contend that the boundaries excluded portions of Westbury, including some houses that were built as part of the same federal Hope VI project by the Portsmouth Redevelopment and Housing Authority.

Greiner believes that might explain why the assessment for his house rose 39 percent, to \$188,000, when a larger, newer home across the street was assessed at \$140,000 and is on the market for \$150,000, he said.

Similar experiences fueled the frustrations of the 30 or so residents who packed a room to make their case to the Board of Equalization.

The three-member panel is appointed by the Circuit Court to hear assessment appeals.

"We're not trying to duck our responsibilities," said Mary Hughes, the civic league president. "We're just asking you to be realistic."

Kattmann said the new homes for sale by the Redevelopment and Housing Authority are priced artificially low. Owners may also take advantage of incentives that they don't have to repay if they re sell after five years, she said.

Westbury was built on the site of former public housing, and it currently includes some subsidized Section 8 rental housing.

Assessments should be full market value of a home. They determine how much owners pay on real estate taxes. In Greiner's case, his tax payment would increase by about \$660.

The Board of Equalization took the Westbury appeals under advisement and will issue a ruling in the coming weeks on the requests.