



Sunday-paper-reading is a ritual at our house, as it probably is at everyone's, and even though I'm not job-hunting or looking for a buy in real estate, I usually read the classifieds.

A recent trend rather disturbs me. The Sunday paper advertises more houses for sale in the Town of Barnstable than in all the other Cape towns put together.

Is the paper's circulation greater in Barnstable than in other areas of the Cape? Are there actually that many more houses for sale in our town? If so, what could be the reason?

A closer study shows the majority of these ads are for houses outside of Hyannis -- most of them are located in Osterville, Marstons Mills, Santuit and Cotuit.

What has changed, recently, in this part of town, which could be influencing home-owners to put their property on the market?

While the crime rate, everywhere, is on the increase, only about 30% of all the crimes committed in town occur outside of Hyannis, with Centerville suffering 11% and Hyannis 69%. It cannot be fear, then, that is driving homeowners from the town's western villages.

The same services are offered to residents of these villages as are available to those in Hyannis; therefore the impetus to move can't be a result of neglect of these outlying areas.

I suspect the reason may be found in real estate assessments since the re-valuation to 100% has placed an inequitable burden on homeowners for these villages. Some people are now paying as much as 300% more in property taxes as ten years ago.

Out here in the western part of town we have more roads than ten years ago, but still less than Hyannis and Centerville. Fewer children attend elementary schools in the smaller villages.

Because there are fewer shops and stores, restaurants and bars, businesses of all kinds, the villages outside Hyannis need fewer local government services such as inspections, parking, traffic control, and police protection.

Yet the brunt of taxation has been dropped on the shoulders of home-owners who use the services the least. Assessments of property in the Hyannis area are lower, per average acre, than in Osterville, Marstons Mills and Cotuit, where some buildable lots on the water are valued in the neighborhood of \$100,000 an acre.

Recreation facilities for young people, with the exception of beaches, are concentrated in Hyannis; throughout the rest of the town, older youngsters congregate on street corners since there is nowhere else to meet together.

You may be comforted in the knowledge people throughout the Commonwealth are voicing concern about raising real estate taxes. People are angry and confused.

Property taxes in Massachusetts are already higher than anywhere else in the country, and are constantly rising from year to year.

In Barnstable, where we have representative Town Meeting, blame is falling on the elected Representatives who appropriate money for local government. The total amount voted is divided by the total assessed valuation of all the privately-owned real estate in the town.

and the tax rate established on that basis.

The inclination to hold the Representatives responsible is understandable; unless you familiarize yourself with the Town Meeting Warrant and learn what choices the Representatives may have, facing the many money articles, it's difficult not to see them as the culprits.

Half the total town budget is the school budget. Another 17% goes for debt and interest. General government costs less than 6%. Approximately 11% goes for the protection of persons and property.

Another 6% falls in Miscellaneous and includes cemeteries, the Conservation Commission, Council on Aging, group insurance and pension, and historical commissions.

The remaining 10% covers the combined budgets of Recreation and Parks, Health and Sanitation, and the Highway Department.

Where, if you were a voting Town Meeting Representative, would you start economizing? Across the board is the temptation we are all subject to. In fact, the Representatives voted such a cut at the last Annual Town Meeting in March, but after reconsideration, restored the funds, as recommended by the Finance Committee.

This dedicated group of citizens spends a good part of each year reviewing costs of each town department, recommending economies, and finally brings to Town Meeting its recommendations. Cuts, where feasible, have already been made, when an article is approved by the Finance Committee.

What alternatives do taxpayers have to supporting local government through property taxes which now appear to be driving residents in the smaller villages of town to the point of selling their homes?

If we can solve this problem on a local level, perhaps it could be solved equally well on a state-wide level; and if we cannot find an equitable way to meet the financial needs of local government, how can we hope to solve the problem at the state level?

Is local government top-heavy with high paid jobs? It would not appear to be from examination of the wage and salary schedules. The ranges begin at less than \$100 a week, and go up to a maximum of \$17,300 a year for those on the department head level. These are not phenomenally high incomes, as compared to salaries paid in the business world.

Are costs of schools outrageously high? It often seems so until comparisons are made with other school systems, other incomes in similar kinds of work, demanding similar kinds of background and productivity. Furthermore, controlling school expenses is beyond the scope of Town Meeting. School budgets enjoy special protection under state laws, and cutting them leaves the Town open to legal action which finally imposes a 25% fine on the town refusing to approve funding the schools have determined they require for the education of children.

Should property taxes be eliminated entirely, and local taxes be raised by taxation on income? Would a local tax, based on federal tax returns, be more equitable? Since federal taxes are already known to be inequitable, the heaviest burden falling on the middle-income people, that must be rejected.

How can taxes be imposed on non-resident land-owners, other than through property tax? Are we to lose the income from summer residents who own homes, here, but claim some other place as their legal residence?

How about persons who live here, but work outside the town? While property taxes seem to many to be a heavy burden, is there a better solution? Or would it be fair to assess property on the basis of ability to pay taxes? It might be fair, but who is to decide? And as property values change, or ownership of property changes, what happens to tax income?

If we could scrap the whole system we have at present, from Washington, right down to Town Hall, what system would best replace it?

Or is it better to accept what we've got as the best there is, no matter how terrible it seems, and let the laws of supply and demand, them that has gets, if you can't stand the heat-get out of the kitchen, determine who can and who cannot afford to live in the Town of Barnstable?