

village view

by Andrea Leonard

It hasn't made any headlines and probably won't, but if the members of Town Meeting go along this week with the Finance Committee's recommendations for Barnstable, line for line, the tax rate will be lower than the Finance Committee recommended last year. By 29¢.

Not less than the final rate set, of course, because the members, a year ago, voted **no** on the salary raises the Selectmen had negotiated.

Since then the school committee and the teachers settled their differences and, what with one thing and another, the school budget is up another million or so.

With increases like that, how can the tax rate show any signs of coming down?

The biggest single reason is that the value of assessed property in Barnstable has risen, in the last twelve months, by \$16,675,455. This would affect the tax rate positively indeed, if costs remained stable.

They don't, though. They go up. Inflation, expanding programs, increased pensions, necessary services to more people push the costs higher and higher.

Barnstable taxpayers plead with Town Meeting members to hold taxes down. Town Meeting members are pledged to do what's best for Barnstable; that's not always best for the pocket.

Deciding what's best for Barnstable isn't always easy.

The municipal employees and the school teachers are also taxpayers in Barnstable. When their salaries go up, so also do their taxes, they point out.

When they receive raises, of course, their incomes grow more than the increases they pay in taxes. If this weren't true, they'd be content with their present salaries.

Furthermore, we who pay their raises must find the extra tax dollars within incomes that in many cases haven't gone up at all. For many of us, the recent economic slump and the

jump in state income taxes have resulted in lower net incomes.

So those who argue that the raises should be approved because the recipients, too, pay taxes, are usually town or school employees.

But; on the other hand, the taxpayer's plight is not entirely without redeeming features.

Because figures all-strung-out tend to confuse me, I try to un-complicate them by rounding them off. If we take a decade-long view of where we stand in Barnstable, we have a happier picture.

Rounded off, we can call our town's present valuation \$750,000,000, the present tax rate \$15 per \$1,000 valuation, the gross amount needed to run the town \$20,000,000, and the inflation rate 170%.

Ten years ago the town valuation was \$75,000,000; the tax rate \$50 per \$1,000, the gross to run Barnstable about \$6,000,000, and the inflation rate 100%.

With these to work with, we can make some reasonable comparisons and see some things to please us.

The valuation of all property is ten times higher than ten years ago. It costs more than three times as much today to run the town. The tax rate is less than a third what it was.

Say your property was assessed, ten years ago, for \$10,000. If it followed the average of all town property, it should now be valued at \$100,000.

If you paid \$500 in taxes on your \$10,000 assessment in 1966, you'd now be paying \$1,500 on \$100,000 value. (The fire district rate is not included in either figure since it varies from district to district.)

However, your dollar has depreciated and today it would take \$170 to equal \$100 in 1966. With today's purchasing power then, you really paid \$850 in taxes in 1966, and you paid only on an assessment of one-third of the property's value.

That is, if it was assessed \$10,000 in 1966, you could probably have sold it for \$30,000 or more. If its fair market value is \$100,000 today (and if it's assessed for that a good real estate agent will get you at least that), you've realized more than 300% increase in value in ten years.

That's about a 30% return on your money, and that's not bad. Even inflation hasn't cut down your real return too terribly. If real estate in Barnstable had increased in value only to the extent inflation affected it, your assessment would be around \$51,000, not \$100,000.

You might prefer that, except that the market value would also be only that much, as well.

The catch to all this, in many instances, is that, chances are, your property isn't valued at ten times what it was ten years ago. It may be more, it may be less, depending on what's happened in the neighborhood.

If you owned a woodlot in 1966 and that land is now house lots, doubtless the assessment is considerably more than ten times as high.

If your property changed from residential to business, your taxes could be higher than average; if the neighborhood has deteriorated, your taxes may be even lower than they were.

Perhaps you bought a small development house ten years ago; in the intervening years most of the houses have been added to, with garages, breezeways, porches, family rooms, ells and such. The changes are now reflected in your assessment and in the market value.

We who live in the western part of Barnstable town feel blessed with some of the nicest residential neighborhoods in the nation. In order to realize the dollar-appreciation outlined above, we'd have to sell our property and move.

And we don't want to do that. Some of us though, may be forced to unless some way is found to take the pressure off ever-mounting property taxes.

If you were a Town Meeting member, where would you save the tax payer's dollar? It's not an easy thing to do, but if you believe you could succeed, please become a Town Meeting member. There's an election every year.