

February 19, 2009

SPECIAL MEETING

Minutes are subject to the approval of the Board of Selectmen.

Present:

First Selectman Mark E. Lyon, Selectmen James L. Brinton and Nicholas N. Solley. Total Valuation CFO Leo deNicola and MIA appraiser Mike Fazio. Members of the public.

Call to Order:

First Selectman Lyon called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. welcoming those present, apologizing for the postponement of this meeting from last night until tonight due to weather, and introducing and thanking Total Valuation's representatives for attending this evening.

Discussion of Town-wide revaluation by Total Valuation:

Mike Fazio opened the discussion by stating he would try to explain how the process of revaluation works, the hearing process and the methodology involved. A revaluation is a "mass appraisal" of the Town's properties used to equalize the tax burden. The State of Connecticut has testing requirements that must be met. There are several "testing" methods used including over 59 "qualified sales" within the Town over the past 18 months. Once the appraisals of all Town properties were completed, the average increase in residential properties since 2003 was 33% and 43% for commercial. The process involves workers going out into the field, measuring the outside of homes, and attempting to gain access (if no one is home, this is noted on the card). All the data collected is then put into a computer program – this includes any differences from previous reval, square footage, condition, grade, type of heating, finished basement, air conditioning, etc. Each street is looked at individually to set land values. This is difficult to do because there are not a lot of land sales. The topography, acreage, views, land influence factors, etc all are considered. Land and building values are then run through the State's requirements and compared to the last report to calculate the percentage of change. If property owners do not agree with the assessment, they request a hearing with Total Valuation and are advised to bring evidence of why they do not agree (comparable sales, corrections to errors). If a resident is not satisfied with the hearing outcome, he/she then has the option of going to the Board of Assessment Appeals and if still not satisfied can appeal with the Superior Court. Mike then opened the discussion to questions. Total Valuation's answers (not verbatim) are indicated in italics.

Howard Lockwood asked about the house sales that were used for comparison and what time frame they were from and how did Total Valuation equate value of lot to acreage cost.

Total Valuation looked at the last 18 months worth of sales and adjusted to the market. Land is valued by taking "house lot" vs. excess land and rear acreage.

Diane Dupuis asked about the impact a foreclosure would have on a neighborhood and what was the meaning of "grade" and "condition".

A foreclosure would be considered unqualified. Grade refers to the quality of construction and condition is a measurement of how the home/property has been kept up. If access to a home did not occur it is judged by the exterior condition. The future trend may be not to do any interior inspections with homeowners being contacted by flyers and questionnaires.

Peter Talbot asked about the effect on the value of a property if neighboring or abutting properties are eased or in a land trust.

Usually not - the neighborhood is looked at as a whole.

Caroline Swartz asked if the field workers looked into the windows to “inspect” the interior.
No.

Ken Cornet commented on the lack of attempts to gain access to do interior inspections - especially for weekenders and people who work; does not understand where figures came from and feels there are many inconsistencies and a lack of credibility.
At some point, most houses have been entered.

Jim Brinton asked if there were industry standards that are followed to determine values.
Total Valuation was not hired to do individual assessments – doing a mass valuation of the Town. If disagree with field cards, request a hearing.

Peter Tagley addressed the Board of Selectmen and Board of Finance – each time there is a revaluation and property values go up, the mill rate is set. Property owner’s taxes are therefore affected by the revaluation.

Changes to the Grand List are made as a result of the revaluation – not the amount of money needed to run the Town. The purpose of the revaluation is to equalize the tax burden. If the budget for the Town is not increased, taxes should not be increased.

Randy Sabin did have an interior inspection, had a hearing and asked when she should expect notification of any adjustment.

When all hearings are completed adjustments will be sent. This is due to the fact that a whole street/road may need to be adjusted if enough evidence is presented against the original findings.

George DeAlessio stated he was never notified when field worker was coming, nor was a request made for an interior inspection. He would have preferred that to have occurred.

Debbie Tomczyk inquired about the way values were determined, how adjustments are made and what sales were compared to.

Once the revaluation is completed, all adjustments made, a manual will be given to the Town, which will explain how values were determined.

Robert Brass felt the largest flaw with the reval had to do with property (land values). There was a miscalculation with his home – this was brought to the attention of the hearing officer and was adjusted. However, his property value increased 600% and when this was questioned at the hearing, the officer’s reply was “I don’t know.” He felt there was no way of knowing what the multipliers for categories were and this was necessary to clearly evaluate the numbers.

Have to remember this is a mass appraisal not individual.

Dimitri Rimsky reminded Total Valuation that Washington’s townspeople are intelligent and obviously had significant questions about the process, the timing of letters (late), failure to follow through on appointment scheduling, etc. People feel mishandled.

At the end of the meeting names can be given to Mike/Leo and someone will be in touch.

Elliot Davis felt that the lack of specificity and the fact that the mass appraisal was indefensible to most at this time meant that the Town should, and had the right, to ask Total Valuation to make their statistics available.

Charles Robinson concurred that more information was needed from Total Valuation.

Valerie Friedman asked how neighborhoods were defined and stated that she felt it was very difficult to find comparables. If interior inspections were not done, the true value of the homes could not be determined. If people were under assessed they were not going to request a hearing and dispute it. She feels the higher end properties are not being fairly assessed.

The comparisons are made on the type of house, the vintage, etc. When field workers were doing their inspections, attempts are noted on the cards regarding gaining access, etc. 630 homes (35%) were inspected interiorly. Residents cannot be forced to allow entrance.

Jean Waterhouse asked if the State gave an average of what properties should be increased by and what was an example of a “lower grade”.

The lowest grade score was a 6 which would indicate sub par building materials, inferior lumber, never upgraded, etc.

Paul Frank stated the process needed to be understood and conceived to be fair. There should be a shifting of the burden from property owner, volunteers on Board of Assessment Appeals, Board of Selectmen, Assessor to Total Valuation and the process should be consistent.

Total Valuation's intent is not to pass the buck.

Ken Cornet, as a real estate agent, found the numbers “interesting” and was struck by the unfairness and felt that at least 1/3 of the assessments he had researched were wrong.

Weston Thorn reiterated the sentiment of expecting uniform standards.

Tim Van Heusen believed the numbers to be inaccurate and it should not be the property owner's responsibility to bring this to the attention of Total Valuation. He conceived this to be unfair as Total Valuation was hired to do the job.

Dick Carey thought property owners would be reassured if they knew, and could understand, how acreage in the Town of Washington was evaluated – it is a complex process as there is soil-based zoning, 25% grades, wetlands, farm land, sub-division regulations, etc. Total Valuation needed to know what the Town requires.

Total Valuation considers the “house lot” and anything above is “excess land”. Not looking to sub-divide.

Jane Roth explained that her home had gone from being a cottage to a “custom-designed home” and disputed the information entered on the card by the field worker. She was at home when the inspection was being done and asked the worker if he would like to inspect the interior. She was told “no”. She did not know how she was to find “comparables” that she was expected to bring to her hearing.

Tony Bedini asked what the contractual date was for completion of the valuation.

First Selectman Mark Lyon explained the assessments were to be completed by November; letters were to be mailed to property owners for hearings to begin in December.

Tony Bedini felt this fact alone was evidence of breach of contract.

Mark Lyon stated that obviously there were issues that needed to be addressed. The Board of Selectmen will speak with and continue to investigate these issues with Total Valuation. Items to be discussed include more hearings for those residents wanting to be heard and were told it was too late or did not receive a return call or whose telephone appointment was not kept by Total Valuation, contract deadlines not being met, unclear methodology, etc. The question appears to remain for many townspeople as to whether or not the revaluation was done correctly.

Adjournment:

Motion: To adjourn the meeting at 9:00p.m. By Mark Lyon, seconded by Jim Brinton and unanimously approved.

Respectfully submitted,
Mary Anne Greene
Selectmen's Secretary