Making the Property Tax Cap
Permanent was Good for
Communities Like Irondequoit

Week of April 29, 2019

We often hear elected officials – politicians if you prefer – make the connection between fiscal responsibility in government and the financial discipline that families practice at their own homes. While this is a common “talking point,” it does indeed hold merit.

The primary difference between a government’s budget and family’s budget, however, is that government can generally control how much revenue it needs to allow it to serve its mission of service and protecting the community. At Town Hall, we see fluctuations on certain revenue streams under which we have no control, including sales tax and mortgage recording tax, among others. The rate of property taxes generally makes up the difference between all other revenue sources and the cost of providing a government, or in the case of our school districts, educating our children.

Up until 2011, there was no blunt instrument to put downward pressure on the growth of property taxes. And while I am confident that most elected officials – whether they be town council members, county legislators or school board members – loathe property taxes as do I, the hard truth is: property taxes in Upstate New York are very high. How high are they? A recent national study found that the Rochester region has the third highest effective property tax rate in America.

There are legitimate arguments claiming that local elected officials have no choice but to levy more in taxes because so many things driving the cost of government are beyond local governments’ control. These include state mandates on school districts. Health care costs, while very competitive for our region, have increased significantly over the past decade. The weather contributes to this pressure on government services as it is town government’s job to plow the roads when it snows. The property tax cap is 2-percent or the rate of inflation – whichever is lower. That’s much less than many of the increases we can’t control. The fear is generally that the cap thwarts a government’s ability to serve its mission.

I have long supported the property tax cap since Governor Cuomo championed it in 2011 and made it state law. I feel it has forced local governments – whether we like it, or not – to have a clear roof above our heads establishing our budgets. Breaking through that roof is still allowed by law, but it’s not as easy as it used to be. For that reason, I am very much in support of the new state law to make the property tax cap permanent and applaud the Governor and Legislature for taking this action.

I am proud that Irondequoit, since the inception of the property tax cap, has never come close to breaking it – something that many of our cohorts have done over the past several years. This, despite the fact we have built a library and several new ballfields; are spending more on paving that we have in a decade; are building a new Public Works facility; and will hopefully be constructing a new community center.

Unless it chooses to incur debt, or if there is some fortunate increase in income, the typical Irondequoit family generally has a set amount of money it can spend each year. I feel there is no reason why Government can’t and shouldn’t play by the same rules. I’m glad that will continue to be the standard and hope it continues to slow the growth of property taxes throughout New York.