

Andover's Total Valuation May Have Dropped Slightly

By Charlie Darling
Beacon staff

As this issue went to press, the final numbers of Andover's recent revaluation weren't available, but Mark Stetson of Avitar had a pretty good feel for what they'd look like.

The last time Andover property valuations were updated was in 2004. Since then the real estate market has risen (until about 2007) and then dropped. By April 1, 2009 (the effective date of the current valuation update), Mark says the local real estate market was "close to where it was in 2004." So barring any changes to a given property or any other significant shifts in its fair market value, you would expect that property's 2009 valuation to be pretty close to its 2004 valuation.

"If a property value increased," Mark says, "it was usually a result of improvements to that property." Other reasons behind an increase (or decrease) in a property's value might be its fair market value (based on the actual selling price of similar properties), or the assessors may have found and corrected an error in the property's data card.

Revaluation Appointments

In mid-September Avitar scheduled appointments for people who wanted to discuss their new valuation. Forty-one people scheduled appointments to discuss their property – about 2.6% of the properties in town.

Several owners had specific questions about statistical information, such as sheds or the number of bedrooms and the like. Avitar's assessing staff visited a number of those properties to verify the information, and they made changes to the property's valuation if necessary.

Other property owners weren't clear as to why their assessments changed. The assessing staff went over with them the methods they used to calculate the property's current fair market value and its new assessment.

Several property owners came in to discuss their property taxes and the fact that they continue to increase each year. "This is not an assessing issue, but a by-

product of the tax system in the state of New Hampshire," says Mark. "Trying to explain that to people is very tricky." [You'll see just how tricky it is when I try to explain it below.]

Although the numbers aren't final yet, it appears to Mark that the town's total valuation (the sum of the value of all the properties) has dropped slightly.

Impact On Taxes

But Mark is quick to point out that a lower total valuation doesn't mean lower taxes! It just means that each person's property value gets divided by a slightly smaller number (the total valuation) to determine what portion of the money to be raised by taxes that person is responsible for. If that person's individual property value dropped by the same percent as the total valuation, they'd be responsible for exactly the same portion of the money to be raised by taxes as they were before the revaluation. If it dropped by more than the total valuation, they'd be responsible for less.

But even that calculation won't tell you if your tax bill is going up or down – you still have to factor in the town, fire, county, and school budgets. If they're up enough this year, even a property that is responsible for a smaller portion of the money to be raised by taxes may have a larger tax bill than they did with their old valuation and smaller budgets.

In other words, a smaller piece of a bigger pie may still be bigger than a bigger piece of a smaller pie. Just knowing how much your property valuation changed doesn't tell you whether your tax bill will be higher or lower than last year.

Later this year, the missing pieces of the puzzle – the total valuation; the final budgets; and the final revenues available to offset expenses – will come together, and our tax bills will arrive in the mail.

But whether your tax bill is bigger, smaller than last year, it's not the revaluation that caused the change: It's the combination of your property's assessment; the total of all property assessments in Andover; and the total dollars that need to be raised by taxes that determine your tax bill each year.



In this photo, taken from the overpass looking toward the Potter Place railroad station in the distance, you can see that the grading has been started for the new parking lot at the intersection of Routes 4 and 11 in Potter Place. Town Administrator Dana Hadley is looking into providing easy access for snowmobiles from the new parking lot to the rail trail.

Also this month the detour around the overpass – Potters Road to Cilleysville Road to Depot Street – has been paved in anticipation of the overpass being torn down in the spring. Staff photo: Charlie Darling

Dam from page 1

counsel. Counsel's advice was that it would cost a lot to fight DES' decision in court, and the Town would have little chance to win the case.

Three Options

In the meantime, DES issued a Letter of Deficiency, telling the Town it must get the dam out of the High Hazard classification. The letter offered a choice of three different ways to achieve that goal.

- Lower Highland Lake by four feet. (Less water behind the dam means less risk.)
- Remove the dam. (No dam, no risk.)
- Remove a significant portion of the privately-owned millpond dam at the old shingle mill, just downstream of the Highland Lake dam. (This would prevent the life-threatening scenario in which a leak in the Highland Lake dam releases so much water so quickly that it builds up behind the millpond dam and floods the adjacent residence.)

Needless to say, the Selectmen never for a moment considered the first two options. But the third option presents its own set of problems:

1. Permission. The millpond dam is privately owned.

2. Demolition Cost. It will cost about \$4,000 to lower 27 feet of the millpond dam by six feet, which is what DES requires.

3. Permits and Reviews. The project will require a dam permit; a wetlands permit; possibly a shoreline permit; and an historical review. The application fees for those permits total approximately \$6,000.

To address the first issue, the Board has worked with the owner of the millpond dam. According to Town Administrator Dana Hadley, the owners have been sympathetic to the Town's plight and have granted their permission to tear down the part of the millpond dam that DES wants gone.

To keep the costs as low as possible, instead of hiring an environmental engineer for the complex and demanding job of filling out the applications for all the required permits, Dana will get help on the technical issues from DES and do the applications himself.

Dana says that there's one bit of good news in this whole affair. "If we have to spend money on this, this is the year to do it. If things go according to plan, we may be able to cover the cost of the project with budget savings we've realized this year. With the economy down and work scarce, we've been getting some pretty good deals, so this unexpected expense may not turn out to be a budget-buster after all."

And with luck, this may mark the *real* end of the project to re-build the Highland Lake dam.

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