

Westchester group pushes school-tax cap

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STAFF

WHITE PLAINS - Westchester residents and businesses are fed up with high property taxes and want state lawmakers to do something about it - even if they have to give up part of their summer break.

That was the message yesterday from leaders of the Westchester County Association, which held a news conference to demand that the state Legislature remain in session until it passes a recently proposed 4 percent cap on annual school property-tax increases. The session is expected to end June 23.

"We don't need 'gone fishing,' " association President William Mooney said, referring to the lawmakers' summer plans.

Mooney said New York's property-tax burden, which is 79 percent above the national average, has reached a crisis level and that lawmakers must act. The tax burden is forcing businesses and residents to leave the state.

"It's unacceptable if you want the state to compete," Mooney said.

During the conference, Mooney and other county association leaders urged the Legislature to adopt the finding of the New York State Commission on Property Tax Relief, which was headed by Nassau County Executive Thomas Suozzi.

Chief among the commission's recommendations, which were issued this month, was a proposal to limit school-tax increases to 4 percent annually. Gov. David Paterson has endorsed the proposal, but leaders in the Assembly and state Senate have yet to offer any commitments that the needed legislation will be adopted.

"The powers that be say the tax cap is dead," said Sen. Jeffrey Klein, D-Bronx, whose district stretches into southern Westchester. "I hope that's not the case. We should stay here until we finish it."

Dan Weiller, a spokesman for Assembly Speaker Sheldon Silver, D-Manhattan, said Silver would support the cap so long as there were assurances that "there would be adequate resources for education."

However, Weiller said the Assembly has no plans "at this time" to remain in session beyond June 23.

Mark Hansen, a spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Joseph Bruno, R-Brunswick, said Senate Republicans are pushing their own plan for property-tax relief, which would give school districts the authority to eliminate residential property taxes over five years, with revenue replaced by additional state funding. That plan, however, has received little support in the Assembly.

The county association, in addition to the cap, is pushing a series of steps to curb the property-tax burden. Among them are "significant mandate reform and relief" and a requirement that school district employees begin to contribute to their health-care costs.

Hoping to press lawmakers to act, the county association also announced what it called a "consensus-building campaign" that will include a series of town hall meetings to rally public opinion. The first is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Tuesday in the auditorium at 800 Westchester Ave. in White Plains.

"You see a lot of anger, you see a lot of fear out there," Mooney said of the public reaction to the growing property-tax burden.

Mooney said the association hopes to make the tax cap an election issue this year. Questionnaires will be sent to members of the county's state delegation as well as to their opponents, seeking their position on the tax cap.

"We are going to drive the agenda," Mooney said.

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