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Opponents rail against Westchester condo tax bill

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Opponents railed against legislation that would change the way taxes are assessed on condominiums and cooperative apartments in Westchester County.

The outcry from local officials continues even though the bill's sponsor, state Sen. Suzi Oppenheimer, D-Mamaroneck, said she has killed the bill for now and maintains it is far narrower in scope than critics suggest.

"We have to keep the heat on," Assemblyman Greg Ball, R-Patterson, said yesterday at a news conference in Somers. "This was a win for the taxpayers and will be a win for the taxpayers if we keep this crazy piece of legislation out of Westchester County."

Joined by Republican county legislator candidates Tom Bock and Greg Kane, Ball called on residents to express their opposition to the offices of Oppenheimer and state Sen. Andrea Stewart-Cousins, D-Yonkers, chairwoman of the Senate's Local Government Committee.

The Assembly passed the bill last month and sent it to the Senate. It would establish a formula to assess commercial properties differently from residential properties. It targets Westchester exclusively.

Business groups such as the Westchester County Association and the Business Council of Westchester have opposed the bill, saying it would unfairly saddle commercial properties, which include condominium and co-op apartment associations, with higher taxes.

Proponents, including the New York State Assessors' Association, say it is needed because rising home prices have skewed the way commercial property is valued.

Local officials are unconvinced. The Yorktown and Somers Democratic town committees issued a joint statement last month condemning the bill. The Yorktown Town Board adopted a resolution opposing it. Somers officials plan to do the same this week.

"It would be devastating to at least 25 percent of the Somers community in terms of the impact it would have on our tax base," Somers Supervisor Mary Beth Murphy said, referring to the 2,606 condo units at Heritage Hills. "People would be losing value on their property. Seniors might not be able to stay in their homes. It's a mistake."

Yorktown Supervisor Don Peters said recently that the bill would hurt seniors and young families, typically condo and co-op owners.

"Those people can't afford to pay more money," Peters said.

Oppenheimer accused opponents of misrepresenting the bill.

She denied the bill would raise taxes on any properties, residential or commercial. Instead, she said, it would apply only when commercial property owners challenged their tax assessments. She said she would consult with business groups before reintroducing the bill.