

In 4 Union towns, property taxes hit 5 figures

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The average homeowner's tax bill in four of Union County's 21 communities has now crossed the \$10,000 mark, according to county tax officials.

In Summit, Westfield, New Providence and Scotch Plains, the average homeowner is now looking at an annual property tax bill in excess of \$10,000.

While the statewide tax figures for this year have yet to be released, as of last year, about 65 towns across the state had crossed the \$10,000 mark.

In Union County, the average homeowner's tax bill, excluding Winfield because of its unique tax situation, is now \$8,540, according to the Union County Board of Taxation, which recently released its annual tax report.

The annual report often invites comparisons between communities. However, the level of property taxes does not tell the whole story.

In some communities, the tax bill includes trash removal, while in others, sewage fees are part of the overall tax bill. Homeowners who must contract privately for trash hauling and garden waste disposal can easily spend upward of \$500 for those services, which then never appear within the local tax bill. Sewage fees also can tack on hundreds of dollars to the cost of home ownership.

Roselle residents were hit the hardest this year, with homeowners seeing a 9 percent jump in taxes. The average tax bill is now nearly \$8,400, up \$700 from last year.

But what the numbers also reveal is the toll that Linden's declining industrial base continues to take on city residents. Over the past five years, property taxes have risen 40 percent, hiking the average homeowner's bill to more than \$6,600, a \$2,000 jump since 2003, according to county tax records.

"Our tax base has shifted considerably," said Linden Mayor Richard Gerbounka. In 1992, residents had to kick in 45 percent of the revenue required to pay for the city, county and local schools. That figure is now over 50 percent for this year.

"The tax base has shifted to the residents because we lost so much industry -- that's why the city of Linden is looking to actively encourage economic development," Gerbounka said.

A proposed warehouse complex in the Tremley Point section has the potential to bring in \$4.2 million in ratables, but the site has been tied up in litigation, he said.

"Linden is the loser in all this litigation," he said.

The closing of the General Motors plant on Routes 1&9 meant the loss of another \$2.75 million to city coffers, which furthered the shift of the tax burden to local residents, he said.

While the site is going to be redeveloped, it could be at least two years before residents see some tax relief from it, Gerbounka said.

"I can remember in the late '70s when the city of Linden did not pay a penny for municipal taxes -- we didn't pay anything. But we don't enjoy that luxury anymore since we lost so much of our industry," he said.

In Roselle, Mayor Garrett Smith said the borough is still looking to sell off property that can be returned to the tax rolls. Twenty of the nearly 120 lots identified for sale were auctioned off, but with the economic downturn, the town has not been able to sell any others, he said.

Smith said he is still looking to find ways for Roselle to share services with other communities. While a recent plan to partner with Linden for fire services fell through, the mayor said he would like to revisit the issue.

"We're going to have to," he said, noting that residents cannot keep up with the continuing tax increases.

"My taxes are closing in at about \$10,000, so I'm not happy either," Smith said.

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