

Tax Relief Task Force

The Tax Relief Task Force is a group of citizens charged by the Village of Brockport Board of Trustees on July 18, 2016. Our work began September 22, 2016. We met monthly (except April), and appreciate the access we were given to Village employees. Over the course of our time together we also grew in appreciation of the talents and dedication of the members of this Task Force.

Our group was convened after the 2nd vote in 6 years to dissolve the Village of Brockport, the primary issue being the high tax rate. All of the Task Force members identify as persons who love our village, yet are concerned about its long term health. In some ways we felt a heavy responsibility to carefully examine this issue, knowing that growth in the tax burden was unsustainable. Without exception, our community police force was important, and we realized that should the village dissolve this asset would be lost. We began our work then with open minds and hopeful hearts.

The Task Force had the opportunity to examine almost all village departments in detail and question responsible staff and department heads. We learned a great deal about where there was flexibility and what was mandated by law, regulation or contract. Try as we may, we could not locate pockets of fat to cut or slush funds to drain. The Department Heads and employees we met were dedicated and competent. Neither was there energy or consensus around what, if any, village services to cut. Like most citizens, we appreciate having sidewalks being plowed in the winter, grass in parks being mowed in the summer, having local and responsive police and public works staff, and a village which supports businesses in our downtown core.

Like most complex and difficult situations that develop over time, reducing the tax burden on Village of Brockport taxpayers will not be easy or quick, but it is possible if we commit to a 3 prong approach of increasing income, reducing expenses, and agitating for changes in state requirements.

INCREASING INCOME

- When the value of existing property in the village increases (ex. run down properties are fixed up so they are worth more) or when property is added to the tax rolls (ex. a new subdivision), the fixed costs of running the village are shifted to a larger base, and the effective tax rate decreases. This sharing of costs benefits all village residents, and therefore we strongly suggest the Village devote more attention to economic development.

- Increased attention should be paid to industrial sites and industries, so that current businesses stay and vacant sites become productive from a jobs and tax base prospective.
- In partnership with the Town of Sweden assessor, we recommend a thorough examination of rental housing assessments, with an eye on fairness to both the landlords' investments and the portion of village resources devoted to rental housing services. This may lead to taxing residential rental property in a different manner.
- The Village has a responsibility to prioritize spending which supports the short and long-term health and safety of residents. But a community is more than its roads, buildings and water pipes, it is also the vibrant culture and connections between and among residents. Whenever possible we encourage the village to seek grant or community funding for these important but non-critical activities.

REDUCING EXPENSES

- We are aware that most Village employees are covered under union contracts which are not currently up for renegotiation, and collective bargaining involves give and take by all sides. Nevertheless, we feel compelled to speak up about practices and agreements that are out of line with community norms and practices in the private sector. Below are some suggestions that we recommend the Board.
- The Village Board needs to learn more about negotiating with labor unions in difficult situations. We recommend hiring independent negotiators going forward.
- Institute an immediate freeze on hiring & no automatic filling of positions. Some vacancies should be filled with a person using the same job description and level, but for many the position can and should be modified and occasionally eliminated. Should the Village of Brockport dissolve, all jobs would end. Everyone on this Task Force cares deeply about the well-being of these employees and wants to prevent a situation which would hurt all of us.
- Initiate a sliding scale for health care premiums. The higher the pay of the employee the larger the percent contribution to the health plan. This adjustment will make the plan more sustainable for the group and help assure coverage for employees for whom health insurance is a significant cost.
- Employees should be responsible for paying their own deductibles. Under the current system employees have no idea about the true cost of their benefits and little incentive to be wise shoppers of health services. We suggest everyone should be aware of aggregate data regarding the cost of benefits, and individuals should be presented, perhaps on an annual basis, a profile of what is paid on their behalf. We appreciate that this is done on an annual basis.

- We need to be aggressive in shopping for more cost effective plans and negotiate contracts that allow for flexibility of carrier and plan details that do not materially impact the spirit and intent of coverage.
- Consider the possibility of eliminating dental coverage.
- Tie wage increases within a grade to 2% or the tax cap or, in the absence of a tax cap, an inflation index - whichever is lower.
- Link growth in village portion of health care benefits to the tax cap or inflation index. For example, if the tax cap was 2% but the cost of health insurance increased 10%, then the village would assume responsibility for 2% of the increase and the remaining 8% would be passed on to employees.
- Consider across the board modifications in paid time off benefits – perhaps capping vacation at five weeks per year, lumping vacation, personal, sick and funeral into one category of Paid Time Off, capping at perhaps two weeks the amount of vacation time that can be carried over to the next year, etc. Sometimes simplifying the system makes it easier for both employees and management to use and not manipulate.
- Reevaluate pay for the Department of Public Works. Currently wages double from Grade 1 to Grade 6, and employees are raised one pay grade per year for the first six years of employment. Consider changing that to a 50% increase, or go to 10 grades and double in 10 years. In similar positions elsewhere the employee would receive smaller raises but over a longer period of time. Raises should be partially based on performance, not only time spent in the position.
- Renegotiate contracts with Brockport Police Department. The benefits that they are receiving are one of the highest costs the Village is facing. The village is taking almost all of the cost away from these employees. The cost sharing scale needs to be leveled giving more of that responsibility to the employee. We all want the BPD here, but if the Village goes to dissolution vote again and is passed (which is likely without changes being made) there will be no more BPD to speak of.
- EVERYONE needs to cut their budget. Instead of one person or group micromanaging where these cuts in the budget should be made, department heads should be given an amount to decrease their budget by - let's say 5%. That way, they can determine what works best for them.

AGITATING FOR CHANGE AT A STATE LEVEL

- While some Task Force members are pessimistic about any influence speaking out may have, others maintain that it is critical for village government and residents to speak truth to the power in Albany. Many of the rules and regulations that govern personnel costs in particular are not under local control.

- Vigorously advocate the NYS legislature pass the SUNY Impact Assistance Act for grants to offset the costs of College at Brockport in the Village.
- Unfunded mandates which apply to rules around sick leave, holidays, vacation carryover, how retirement benefits are calculated, benefits that must be offered to retirees, etc. impose a significant and long lasting drag on village finances.
- Change period of time between allowed votes to dissolve to 10 years from current 4.

We imagine that all of these options will be painful for those involved but for the greater good of the community changes HAVE to be made. Looking at the Village like a normal family home, what would you do if your income was not increasing but your costs continued to increase? You make sacrifices to keep things running. You downsize on your shopping, you reduce your cable package, you cut your cell phone, you eat out less. Perhaps you take on a second or third job. Is it a pleasant experience? NO. Is it worth it in the long run? YES! Without these changes and sacrifices in life we face bigger troubles such as bankruptcy or loss of essentials.

The members of the Task Force differ in the emphasis each of us would put on some of these specific recommendations, yet we speak in one voice affirming not just the desirability but the necessity for this 3 prong approach.

In conclusion we hope that decisions can be made that will help reduce the cost of living and operating a business in the Village of Brockport. We would hate to see dissolution of the village and loss of the police department but that is the direction things are heading if our situation does not improve quickly. Families will continue to move out of our lovely Victorian village and the rental population will increase. We are confident that there are things that can be done to make Brockport a more affordable and desirable place to live for everyone.