

Local/State News

Idaho group complains of rising property taxes

Legislative hearing in Sandpoint is dominated by call for property tax revolt

SANDPOINT (AP) -- Charging that Idaho lawmakers are not doing enough to prevent rising property taxes from driving people out of their homes, a grass-roots group says it will file papers today with the secretary of state's office for an initiative campaign to limit assessments.

"In a perfect world, you would do this job," initiative organizer and former Bonner County Commissioner Tom Suttmeier told the Idaho Legislature's Interim Committee on Property Taxes in the first of several statewide public hearings Wednesday in Sandpoint.

Members of the joint House and Senate study committee were chastised for failing to give local government revenue-raising options besides property taxes and for being slow with relief for what many labeled a "tax crisis" facing Idaho homeowners the past few years.

The tax-relief petition drive is being launched by the Committee for Sensible Taxation of Property, which circulated a 100-page proposed initiative it wants to put before Idaho voters next year.

Modeled after California's Proposition 13, the measure would cap taxes and assessed values of all property in the state. More than 44,000 signatures of registered voters are required to get an initiative on the ballot.

Some people attending the hearing said they were angry that lawmakers have not acted sooner to provide tax relief in the wake of increasing property values in many parts of the state.

"You need to lead from the front of the parade," said Ed Lindahl of Sagle, "instead of having an initiative make you clean up behind it."

Many in the audience booed when Gilbert Beyer of Sandpoint said the proposed initiative isn't a viable solution and that Proposition 13 had degraded California's public-school system by draining property-tax dollars.

The resulting catcalls and rowdiness prompted the committee's co-chair, Republican Sen. Shawn Keough of Sandpoint, to take off her high-heeled navy pump and bang it on the table, demanding order.

"You're welcome to take me out and hang me, but we must be respectful," she said.

In Coeur d'Alene, another group proposed changes to the state's "circuit breaker" program that gives tax breaks from \$150 to \$1,200 to people older than 65 who qualify. They asked lawmakers to increase the amount of the state homeowners exemption -- which exempts



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from tax bills half the value of an owner-occupied home up to \$50,000 -- for people over 65 who don't qualify.

Others said legislators should make it easier for cities and counties to level impact fees on developers who build new subdivisions. In many cases, they said, property taxpayers foot the bill for the schools, parks, police and fire protection needed by the neighborhoods.

A few also told the legislators that much of the problem lies with a lack of fiscal discipline by Idaho's elected officials.

"We really have a tax crisis and it's your job to work for us, not grow the government," said Colleen Clark of Sandpoint.

After public meetings this week in Sandpoint, Coeur d'Alene, Lewiston and Moscow, the panel will be holding hearings in Hailey and Twin Falls on Aug. 10, Pocatello and Rexburg on Aug. 11, McCall and Emmett on Aug. 24, and in Boise and Nampa on Aug. 25.

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