

City stands to lose money with utilities' tax break

By Heather Newman
Staff Writer

The Farmington City Council Monday adopted a resolution opposing a special tax break for utilities, joining what has become a fight pitting state government against local governments.

Council voted 5-0 with councilwoman Mary Bush absent against the tax break, which could cost the city more than \$18,000 annually. That figure is based on the utilities' reported property values for 1999 assessments and the 1999 millage rate for city services.

On Nov. 23, the State Tax Commission adopted three new cost multiplier tables to be used by assessors in valuing utility personal property. These significantly reduce the value of the utility personal property for taxation purposes, resulting in lost revenue for local governments.

Municipalities could be forced to pay even more if the years 1997 through 1999 are all included, making it retroactive.

The city could be required to refund \$44,130 in personal property taxes plus any interest that has accrued from the date the payments for each tax bill were made," City Assessor John Salter wrote in a memo to City Manager Frank Laubach.

"We have strong support from all three counties," Salter said at Monday's meeting, referring to Guilford, Wayne and Madison counties. "It seems like every year state government is cutting revenue to local governments—and we're sitting up."

Farmington Hills officials in particular were incensed by the tax break idea because of repeated problems with utility service, particularly from Detroit Edison. Many residents and public officials have criticized the utility firm for frequent power outages, particularly those that can't be explained by the weather. Some outages lasted longer than 24 hours and prompted residents to buy generators.

The tax break could save utility companies like Detroit Edison, Consumers Energy and Michigan as much as \$200 million and cost local governments

Farmer Jack

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"We looked very hard to try and find an anchor user," he said, adding they sought something like a Kally's department store to occupy the structure as it was. "We tried that for many months. With the single story, it's more economical to lay out merchandise and to staff it.... The multi-story buildings, you just don't see being built."

Butler felt Farmer Jack would add a lot of vitality to the center, which had enjoyed 100 percent occupancy for years. With Crowley's tenants had expressed concern over a drop in foot traffic, and some had even suggested Butler approach a grocery store.

While board members were glad to see Farmer Jack in the picture, they wanted to make sure Butler addressed past problems with overall maintenance.

"I've noticed, especially after the 1998 renovation, that it just doesn't seem to have the vibrancy or energy or awesomeness that it should," said board member John Akneri, who lives in the area. "What are you going to do to maintain

that level of first-classness? Farmer Jack will bring."

Butler pointed out the center's exterior had been painted two years ago, and a new maintenance contract to have the parking lot swept would also address concerns about overflowing trash containers. Willing shrewbery had been the trouble "from day one," but one landscaping would include sprinklers to ensure plantings remained healthy.

"In order to get the (retail) store you need, you have to have a good, quality center," Butler said. "It costs a lot of money to continually replace shrewbery just because it isn't wanted."

Butler said routine repairs were being made. However, he pointed out, the center doesn't have a full-time maintenance person. He visits the site once a week.

"You kind of have to rely on your tenants to be your eyes and ears," he said.

Board member Mary Avery described potlucks big enough to swallow up a car and bricks in concrete walls that could be a safety hazard and liability risk.

"Let's fit it while it's broken, before it gets to be beyond anyone's expectations," she said. "These things, in my opinion, have been let go."

While board members had concerns about upkeep and the changed building footprint, they also agreed the project's details could be worked out by the planning commission upon second review. They also liked the idea that Farmer Jack would very likely sign a long-term lease—at least 20 years and probably 30, Butler said.

"In some respects, I feel the requests are out of character," said board member Richard Gray. "It's true they've neglected this shopping center off and on over the years. They have also been a long-time tenant and they've paid their taxes and been a neighbor."

"I have great confidence in our planning commission and planning consultants," Avery said. "I have great faith that they will address all these things so far as landscaping, lighting, trash and all these things."

Hero

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free-standing building next door, Starbucks Coffee, with an open parking space near the entrance of the glass windows.

With one arm, she pulled down her driver's side window and stuck her arm out. With her other arm, she pressed down as hard as she could on the car horn. Although it seemed like eternity, her objective for rescue was to come out and realize she was in a life-and-death situation. At first, nobody helped. But soon, an alert Starbucks employee, Rita Francis, inquired about what the matter was.

"I said, 'Call 911. I'm having a heart attack,'" she recalled. "I had to tell her I was having a heart attack because they wouldn't bring an ambulance otherwise. As soon as I knew someone was coming to my aid my eyes closed."

Soon, another woman came over to the car and held Dubin's hand while EMS paramedics rushed over from the West Bloomfield Fire Department station on Orchard Lake, located about a mile north of Starbucks.

Susan Dubin still can't believe how she was able to think rationally while she was in the midst of a severe heart attack. She thought about where it would be best to park her car for quick attention. She made sure she told Rita Francis the whom the

family is eternally grateful to call 911 and that they knew the situation. She answered questions from paramedics about where to be taken.

Every time the scenario of Wednesday, Dec. 29 is described by Howard or Susan Dubin, she can't help but shake her head in disbelief.

"It's very surreal when I hear Howard talking on the phone about what happened," Susan said. "I still can't believe it happened to me. When I think how I was able to be so analytical about it, it astounds me."

It was Saturday Howard Dubin, who in September sold his longtime clinic in the Downers Farmington Center to Dr. Daniel Vargovick (although Dr. Dubin is continuing in a part-time basis).

Four days on the critical list were followed by another five days in the hospital's critical care unit. Finally, on Jan. 8, she was released home accompanied by various monitors and oxygen containers.

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of this year is something for Susan to look forward to. "We fixed them up," she said. "Participating in a different matter of the heart, Susan's recovery is only about 5 percent advanced from the day she came home. Because so much of her heart was damaged, she is constantly tired. It's not physical exertion that tires her out, either. She's asked to re-schedule a newspaper interview from mid-afternoon to morning, a time of day when she has more energy."

"You have to play the game," Susan said. "But I have a wonderful family and friends. I really couldn't have done it without them to morning, a time of day when she has more energy."

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