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Circuit breaker supporters still hopeful despite a lack of funds

June 2, 2009 at 11:30 am by Rick Kartin



Pictured above is a sign that one of the supporters hung at The Sign of the Tree restaurant earlier this morning and it summed up the feelings of the roughly 65 people who showed up, complete with red t-shirts, to support a property tax circuit breaker bill.

They attended a brief informational session before heading off to lobby their respective lawmakers on the plan, which would provide income-based rebate on property taxes for those who qualified.

Part of the growing push for a circuit breaker grew out of last year's proposal for a school property tax cap. That has abated this year in the face of heavy opposition by the state's politically powerful education lobby, and tax protesters appear now to be placing their hopes on a ~~cap~~ circuit breaker.

Among the speakers Tuesday were the Fiscal Policy Institute's Frank Mauro and Ron Deutsch who is heading a group formed last year, the Omnibus Consortium, created to push for a circuit breaker. Both organizations have union backing.

One of the proposals would kick in for households earning \$100,000 or less. Once their property tax bill hit 9 percent of income, or \$9,000 for a \$100,000-earner, homeowners would get a refund equal to 70 percent of the amount over 9 percent.

The property tax threshold would be lowered in subsequent years, eventually triggering a rebate if property taxes hit 6 percent of household income, which for a family earning \$100,000 would be a \$6,000 tax bill – for both county, school and other taxes.

Those numbers, as well as the lawmakers who attended the event, provide a clue to the regional nature of the property tax crisis.

Hudson Valley legislators Sandra Galef, who Deutsch described as the “matriarch” of the circuit breaker movement attended as did Aileen Gunther Joe Saladino, Frank Skartados, Mark Molinaro, and Ellen Jaffe as well as staffers from Betty Little and Peter Lopez.

With the exception of Little, these lawmakers are from Long Island and the Hudson Valley, where property taxes are indeed eating up substantial percentages of peoples' take-home salaries. In the Adirondack region represented by Little, there also are specific spots such as lakefront homes where big valuation increases have also raised taxes.

In addition to lobbying lawmakers, advocates also planned to stage a brief event outside the governors office.

Despite the activity, it's starting to look like a long shot that the circuit breaker, let alone a cap or other forms of substantial property tax relief may be passed this year given the state's ongoing budget crisis. Even Mauro, Deutsch and Galef conceded as much.

Part of the problem is the cost of a circuit breaker. Initially, it was supposed to be paid for by cancellation

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of the \$1.5 billion STAR rebate.

The rebate was indeed cancelled but the money was rolled into the Legislature's effort to close a \$17.7 billion budget gap in this year's budget.

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