

Zoning Affects 90 Percent of N.C. Citizens

Since North Carolina's cities and counties were granted the optional power to enact zoning ordinances to regulate land use, opinions on the need for local land use regulation have strongly diverged. Some citizens see zoning as intrusive, while others see it as an essential role of local government. Some argue that the state legislature should mandate implementation of land use regulation in every locality.

How many North Carolinians live in areas already covered by zoning? The best estimate is drawn from a 2002 survey of all 544 incorporated cities and all 100 counties in the state. Four hundred forty-one (68 percent) of the 644 jurisdictions in the state responded to the survey. Most of the nonresponding jurisdictions were cities with populations under 1,000.

Three hundred fifty-seven (81 percent) reported having a zoning ordinance. Among cities with populations greater than 1,000, 97 percent had zoning. Seventy-four of the state's 100 counties now have zoning for some or all of the area outside cities. These totals indicate that slightly more than 90 percent of the state's population lives in areas subject to zoning. So a state requirement that cities and counties enact zoning would largely be symbolic.

Information on other data gathered from the survey is available in a forthcoming Institute publication by David Owens and Adam Bruggemann, *A Survey of Experience with Zoning Variances* (Special Series No. 18). For more information, contact the Publications Sales Office, phone (919) 966-4119, e-mail sales@iogmail.iog.unc.edu.

Civic Engagement News

Forums Identify Priorities for Civic Engagement

Building on the North Carolina Civic Index, an analysis of youth and adult civic involvement (reported in the Fall 2003 issue of *Popular Government*, p. 4), the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium worked with six local planning teams to host eight Civic Index Community Forums across the state between September 22 and November 6. More than 150 young people joined 350 adults, including representatives of schools, government, business, and community organizations. Each of the eight forums developed its own top strategies to improve youth civic engagement. The most frequently occurring strategies were as follows:

- Bring more government officials into the classroom.
- Incorporate real-world or current events discussions into classroom activities.
- Enhance youth's opportunities for leadership (for example, service on boards or involvement in the political process).
- Involve parents and families in improving youth civic engagement.
- Initiate Kids Voting programs.
- Encourage voter registration.

The eight forums took place in Asheville, Charlotte, Cullowhee, Fayetteville, Greensboro, Greenville, Hendersonville, and Raleigh. For the top strategies of each forum, visit www.civics.unc.edu/civicindex/aboutforums.htm, and click on the forum of interest.

Summit Recommends Strategies for Supporting Schools' Civic Mission

On December 4, 2003, the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium partnered with nine other organizations and agencies to host a Policy Summit on the Civic Mission of Schools. The summit convened policy makers, educators, and others to review the state of civic education in North Carolina and develop policy recommendations to support the civic mission of K-12 schools.

The working session featured Howard Lee, chair of the State Board of Education, and workshops showcasing best practices in civic education.

All participants had an opportunity to recommend policy strategies for supporting



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Feedback on Property Tax Assessments

I read Michael Walden's article titled "Improving Revenue Flows from the Property Tax" (*Popular Government*, Fall 2003, p. 13). While Dr. Walden correctly identifies several problems with our current tax system, I suggest that the problems associated with his proposed solution far outweigh the advantages.

Members of the North Carolina Association of Assessing Officers (NCAAO) have discussed this concept several times over the past twenty years. Our conclusion has consistently been that mass adjustments by some type of single multiplier tend to exacerbate equity problems. The author addresses this issue by saying, "Standards and procedures would have to be established . . . Several issues would have to be addressed . . . Local leaders will have to decide if these issues can be easily overcome." The lack of acceptable standards and procedures for dealing with equity issues is precisely why this multiplier system has been consistently rejected by the NCAAO.

I also do not think the author fully anticipates the potential negative reaction that taxpayers might have to the improved revenue stream created by annual valuation adjustments with no adjustment to the tax rate. Many taxpayers will have no trouble reaching a conclusion that the improved revenue stream brought about by such adjustments is nothing more than another form of a tax increase. This type of system contributed to Proposition 13 in California and other "valuation freeze" initiatives across the country.

The author did not address the fact that annual reassessments will likely generate annual appeals. Most counties barely have sufficient staff to survive under our current system. Consider the impact on the staff of the Property Tax Division and the Property Tax Commission if all counties were even on a four-year reassessment cycle. Proper staffing levels would be needed at both the local and the state level if tax officials were to be asked to handle annual appeals.

The city or county elected body is responsible for determining spending priorities and is therefore responsible for selecting the property tax rate. Under the author's proposal, the tax rate remains constant, and the tax base theoretically shifts upward each year. The shifting of the responsibility for increased revenues from the governing body to the assessor's office places such responsibility in the wrong place.

I think we can agree that a much smaller net annual tax increase may be preferable to the sticker shock brought about every eight years. This is one of the reasons that many North Carolina counties have moved to a four-year revaluation cycle. We already have statutory authority to conduct more frequent revaluations, even annual ones if approved by the governing body. I submit that with proper staffing levels, high-quality databases, and sufficient computerization, all counties could revalue real property much more frequently.

—W. A. (Pete) Rodda, CAE

The author, Forsyth County tax assessor/collector, has been an assessor/collector for more than twenty-two years. He currently serves as treasurer of NCAAO and is a past president of the North Carolina Tax Collectors Association.

Walden's Response I appreciate Forsyth County Tax Assessor/Collector Pete Rodda's response to my article. In essence, Mr. Rodda believes that the "cure would be worse than the disease." This is entirely possible. In fact, I ended my article by stating, "Local leaders will have to decide if these issues [issues related to changing to a new property tax system] can be easily overcome. If not, then the current system, even with its flaws, may be the better alternative."

Nonetheless, I think it is crucially important that locally elected leaders and property owners be educated about the flaws in the current system because, as I tried to illustrate, those flaws have a profound impact on revenue flows from, and citizen acceptance of, the local property tax. I have always found it interesting that many individuals accept being taxed on their *current income* and *current spending* but not on their *current property value*.

Mr. Rodda and I do agree that with improved technology and proper staffing, more frequent revaluations may be the best practical solution.

—Michael L. Walden

schools' civic mission. The most frequently suggested strategies were as follows:

- Adopt policies beyond testing to hold schools accountable for their civic mission.
- Provide professional development for teachers and administrators on how to use interactive strategies, such as service-learning.
- Develop local or state curricula and strategies that encourage schools to interact with the community and the government (state or local).
- Adopt mandatory service-learning in K–12 schools.
- Incorporate into state standards the promising practices from *The Civic Mission of Schools* (a national report released in February 2003).
- Develop and promote funding for model programs that can be replicated.
- Allow more time in the standard course of study for teachable moments; focus on current issues.

Cosponsors of the summit were Communities in Schools, the Kenan Institute for Ethics (Duke University), the N.C. Campus Compact, the N.C. Center for Public Policy Research, the N.C. Congress of Parents and Teachers, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction, the N.C. School Boards Association, the Office of the Governor, and the Public School Forum. State Farm Insurance was a financial sponsor. For the full report, visit www.civics.org.