

Allegheny County assessment shows inequities between wealthy and impoverished

Posted By [PPNS12](#) On October 25, 2012 @ 4:30 PM In [Fall 2012,News,News Feed](#) | [No Comments](#)

By Ralph Musthaler
Point Park News Service

Amassed along Field Club Road in Fox Chapel lies property with market values in excess of \$800,000, but the reassessments by a private firm reflects a value \$15,000 lower.

On Second Avenue, Braddock, property values hover at or around \$9,000.

The inequities of the court-ordered property evaluations, performed at a cost of \$9.3 million by Tyler Technologies, are a paradox of how millions of dollars in court costs and reassessments over the past two decades have not created fairness.

The results indicate records showing the poor burdened with much higher tax rates than the wealthy.

"It's created a lot of nuisance," said Mayor John Fetterman of Braddock during a telephone interview. "For example, my local nonprofit holds a title on a building on Braddock Avenue and the value has gone up sixfold."

The new values to take place on Jan. 1, 2013 reflect a value increase in Braddock and the neighboring Rankin by 25 and 75 percent respectively, according to statistics on Allegheny County's property assessment website.

These statistics represent a stark contrast to the values of more affluent communities, like Monroeville, whose values increased by 26 percent and Fox Chapel by 22 percent.

The numbers indicate that many homes in Fox Chapel received little if any increase in valuation, or in the case of Field Club Rd a substantial decrease.

According to U.S. Census Bureau statistics, Fox Chapel has a median income of \$178,542 and an overwhelmingly white population of 91.9 percent.

Conversely, Braddock's median income is a meager \$18,473, with a predominantly African-American population of 68 percent.

"If that's the way they operate, I want no part of it," said Jim Reichert, North Braddock resident and borough councilman.

Reichert, who recently challenged the assessment in appeals court, saw his home valued around \$8,000 inflated to an estimated value of \$17,000.

According to Reichert, his residence along Earl Street has been afflicted by crime and abandoned, dilapidated houses, creating confusion over why his property value increased from its market value of \$8,000.

A comparison of two random homes on Field Club Road show similar values of around \$800,000 with an almost identical devaluation.

The residents of these two homes declined to comment.

Donald Driscoll, an attorney with the Community Justice Project, started challenging the unfairness of the county's assessments in 2001.

"The initial indication was that it was very regressive, the results favored higher value properties and lower value properties were taxed at a higher ratio of their actual value to their assessed value," Driscoll said.

According to Driscoll, in 2002 his lawsuit went all the way to the Pennsylvania Supreme Court where the court dismissed it because he did not identify the problem and inform the court how the county could remedy the situation.

Because of the substantial investment during the reassessment process, the county decided to use a three-year assessment schedule, which prompted an additional assessment in 2005, according to Driscoll.

In 2005, Driscoll filed an additional suit leading to the 2009 decision by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court to order the county to perform a reassessment under the supervision of Allegheny County Common Pleas Judge R. Stanton Wettick.

Driscoll said that assessment yielded a substantial improvement but still showed pockets of errors.

"When you're doing a reassessment of 560,000 [homes] in a county such as Allegheny, which is old and the housing is not uniform by any means, it is a very difficult undertaking," Driscoll said.

60,000 homeowners are challenging the appeals.

But the impoverished and elderly are left frustrated.

"We had to schedule meetings, we had to miss work, we had to go downtown and pay for parking, and that's just been replicated wholesale across the board in Braddock and in Rankin and in other communities," said Fetterman.

Despite appeals resulting favorably for 47 percent of Allegheny County residents, Mayor Fetterman remains dissatisfied with the over implementation of the assessment process.

"It's shocking, and their realizing quickly that there is no basis, statistical, economical, or physical to justify these numbers that are coming, I think it is emblematic of the overall poor job that the firm that was contracted, actually did," Fetterman said.

Article printed from Point Park News Service: <http://www.pointparknewsservice.com>

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