

“Remove that school tax!”

More than 100 gather at Legislature over system, inability to vote

Posted By Heather Robbins

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WINNIPEG — Shouts of ‘Remove that school tax!’ rose from steps of the Legislature June 10, as more than 100 protestors voiced their anger over why the tax hasn’t been removed from their seasonal properties bills.

“The most important things are health care and education,” said David Crabb, president of the Manitoba Association of Cottage Owners (MACO). “Without your health, you have nothing. Without education you have no future. If it’s so damn important, why does education funding not get the same respect as healthcare?”

Crabb, who owns property in Beaconia in the RM of St Clement and represents cottage owners in Gimli and Winnipeg Beach, says Premier Gary Doer changed his stance on how school taxes are collected.

“When he was in opposition in the legislature (Doer) was a critic of the shift of school taxes onto property taxes and even supported a committee report condemning the property tax base shift,” said Crabb. “Doer’s had 11 years to make a change.”

Doer recently stated collecting school taxes on secondary property is practised across the country and the province can only afford to focus on reducing the school tax burden on farm land.

“Cottage and house owners in provincial parks don’t have to pay school taxes,” said Crabb. “People in apartments don’t pay tax. The owner does, but they can’t raise rents to make up the school tax increase. The farmers are getting kickbacks, I’m not, and the

government gets the neat idea to credit back part of the property tax. Heck, would that be illegal in the private sector? It's wrong and unfair."

According to a Manitoba Conservation spokesman, people owning private land in provincial parks, such as Golden Acres in the Whiteshell Provincial Park, pay property and school taxes to a local municipality or local government district. Cottage owners inside a provincial park where no taxes are payable to a municipality or local government district pay an annual fee determined by the province yearly for services such as road maintenance; docking facilities; garbage removal and disposal; neighbourhood watch programs; street-lighting and emergency services.

Tory MLA Ralph Eichler (Lakeside) encouraged rally attendees to exercise their right to gather, lobby their MLAs for change and sign a petition to be read in the legislature.

"When we make a petition, the other side rolls their eyes but after a while they'll hear it," said Eichler. "(School taxes) place an excessive burden on property owners. We rely too heavily on the percentage of taxes to fund education, which is essential to attract people to Manitoba. We're overtaxing, which is a waste money."

Crabb says his association opposes paying taxes to school divisions whose board members they cannot vote for.

"It's all about unfairness," said Crabb. "It's taxation without representation."

Crabb says part of his objection to paying school taxes is the lack of provincial accountability the current model offers.

"I'm looking at the system and seeing rural kids getting the short end of the stick," said Crabb. "They don't have all the benefits, resources and tools they need to make it equal to children going to school in Winnipeg or Brandon. Graduation rates are so low it's gross. They wouldn't have computers, libraries and resources if it weren't for the parent actions committees. It's the parents of the students that took it upon themselves to deal with it, not the schools or province, whose constitutional responsibility is education. We need to make the government accountable."

Manitoba cottagers are contending not only with school taxes but significantly increased property assessments.

Single-family dwellings or residents in the RM of Victoria Beach will see the largest reassessment at 93 per cent, followed by Winnipeg Beach at 79 per cent, RM of Lac du Bonnet at 70 per cent, RMs of Alexander and St. Laurent at 66 per cent, Village of Dunnottar at 63 per cent, RM of St. Clements at 62 per cent and RM of Gimli 60 per cent. Comparably, the overall increase of single-family dwellings or residences in Manitoba excluding Winnipeg is 46 per cent.

Gus Wruck, vice president of MACO, says while reassessments are up, taxes could go down.

“It’s driven up by property sales,” said Wruck. “My assessment went from \$310,000 to \$450,000. But theoretically municipal and school boards are still maintaining their budgets within reason, so from my perspective the mill rate should be going down.”

t taking alternate action if school divisions aren’t sensitive to the increase in cottage property assessments.

Wruck says school boards should take into account the effect of increases on taxpayers.

“The RM of Lac du Bonnet experienced a growth of 400 people from the 2001 to 2006 census,” said Wruck. “That was due almost entirely to 55-plus [aged] people coming. I’m at the front end of the retiring baby boomers. When you retire, you’re on a fixed income and an individual can’t absorb fantastic tax increases.”

Larry Baker, a director for the association who organized the rally, says his assessment has gone up 89.5 per cent in the last three years, 66 per cent in the last year.

“We want school taxes off all property,” said Baker. “Four provinces and two territories have taken school taxes off property tax and Saskatchewan recently took away the school division’s authority to set school taxes. We are one of three areas that still do this; so do Quebec and the Northwest Territories. We now have the highest school taxes in all of Canada levied by local school divisions.”

Baker, a Stonewall resident who previously organized a tax protest Sept. 29 in Lundar where he owns property, says he still hasn’t paid his school taxes from his property bill.

“The interest is one per cent a month,” said Baker. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to pay and get nothing in return.”

Crabb said despite government opposition, the rally is a cornerstone in changing how school taxes are collected.

“It’s exciting to make change that’s fair for all Manitobans,” said Crabb.