

100 Franklin Township residents complain about tax assessments

by [Tiffani N. Garlic](#)/For The Star-Ledger

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Nearly 100 Franklin Township residents groaned in sympathy and clapped in support as speaker after speaker complained about the latest tax assessments in Franklin Township.

Property owners in the township say the recent assessments have doubled, and in some cases even tripled, the amount of taxes they will have to pay this year.

Before public discussion was opened at Tuesday night's council meeting, Mayor Brian Levine cautioned those assembled that the council had limited power over tax assessments. He suggested the residents' best course of action would be to go through the appeals process.

Then, due to the sheer number of people who intended to speak, Levine reduced the time allotted for each person from the regular five minutes to two.

Residents snaked down the aisle anyway and stood against the walls of the municipal hearing room waiting their turn to rail against the new numbers.

Courtney Throckmorton, owner of Somerset Transmission and Repair Center at 591 Somerset St. said she feared the new assessments threatened small businesses. "These new assessments are so egregiously wrong that they are going to have serious consequences on the viability of many of our businesses. It may actually put some of them out or force them to lay off people just to pay their taxes."

"I think somebody is asleep at the board here," said Harry Weber Sr., owner of Franklin Stamp and Sign Co. at 543 Somerset St. Weber said his assessment had doubled and put his business in jeopardy. "With an assessment like I got and the climate that exists out there, which is real bad, I don't think I can make it. So at this time I would like to give my keys to the council," he said tossing the keys at the foot of the dais.

An average business was assessed at \$2.9 million in Franklin last year. Under the new numbers, this year that business is assessed at \$4.2 million, according to tax assessor Stan Belenky.

Some business owners like Jesus Gonzalez of the Deerwood Service Center at 1376 Hamilton St. reminded the council that the assessments would not only hit the business community. "I do a lot of donations for the town -- police, fire, Mothers Against Drunk Driving -- I would have to eliminate those donations in order to be able to afford these new taxes."

Resident Ainsley Reynolds asked about the next step. "What is the back up plan when a lot of these businesses go out of business and you still have the same expenses and the burden shifts to the residents?"

"What the assessor has done is going to kill small businesses," warned attorney Darren Dapas of Lanfrit and Tullio. Dapas suggested that New Jersey law did not support the assessments and offered his services to help residents challenge the numbers.

"This is not in accordance with statutes, this is in accordance to the law of Stan Belenky and the people of this township need to stand up and they need to assert their rights," Dapas said. "They need to talk to counsel. They need to look into taking law suits against the township both from appeals process and other perspectives. The people of the township can not allow this to happen."

Belenky insisted that his assessments were in accordance with state law. He invited residents to take up their grievances with his office through the appeals process.

"There's no such thing as business-friendly assessments, only fair and equitable assessments based on fair market values as of October 1 of the tax year." Belenky cautioned that adjusting the assessment to appease residents would be counterproductive, "To give relief to part of the town, you're taking it away from another part of the town," he said.

Council members Kimberly Francois and Rajiv Prasad said that they refused to accept that as a governing body the council was powerless to address the public's outrage. "This room wouldn't have been flooded with people begging and crying out 'help us' if we didn't have a severe problem here," Francois said.

Prasad suggested the council freeze the tax assessment and conduct a brand new assessment with a different assessor. The council said that it would consider these alternatives, but questioned the efficiency of any action that would accrue penalties for property owners. The next council meeting is scheduled for April 14.