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CITY OF BUFFALO

Lawmakers consider Rochester's four-year reassessment model

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Property owners in Rochester never have to worry about back-to-back annual increases in their assessments. That's because the city reassesses properties every four years — and only in that year.

Some believe Buffalo should implement a similar policy. Critics note that the annual revaluation has saddled thousands of property owners in neighborhoods where home prices are rising with up to four assessment increases in eight years.

Buffalo lawmakers met Wednesday

with two Rochester assessment officials to learn more about that city's property revaluation process. Thomas A. Huonker, who heads Rochester's Assessment Bureau, believes the city-wide property canvass that is performed every four years has worked effectively.

An attorney who has helped scores of Buffalo property owners fight their assessments said the most common complaint involves people who get hit with repeated increases. Peter Allen Weinmann said people's anger intensifies when they learn that some neighbors' properties were not reassessed.

"Those who have not been reassessed in that particular year are riding essentially as freeloaders on the backs of those who have been hit in that particular year of the reassessment," Weinmann told the Common Council's Finance Committee at a special meeting. "That is an inherent unfairness."

The man who heads Buffalo's Assessment and Taxation Department said it's too soon to say whether the city might consider going to a four-year citywide reassessment model. Martin F. Kennedy said many factors must be weighed. He added that the state is working on regulations that could provide financial incentives to

municipalities that move to citywide property revaluations on four-year or five-year schedules.

In recent years, Buffalo has reassessed between 20,000 and 35,000 properties annually out of about 96,000 parcels in the city. The downside of waiting several years to reassess all properties could be the "shock effect" experienced by people who discover huge increases in assessed value, as opposed to incremental hikes every couple of years.

"It's important that the public understand that when you get to the fourth year, you might get shocked. And we'll probably be hearing about

those," said Niagara Council Member David A. Rivera.

But he said it's important that the city review other reassessment models.

In the past week, the city sent notices to nearly 2,400 property owners that their assessments are tentatively set to rise next year. This would be the lowest number of proposed increases in Buffalo in at least 15 years. Kennedy said a number of changes were made in how the process was conducted. He said new valuation districts were created and assessors have been "looking at things differently."

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