



**City of Belfast
Office of the Assessor &
Addressing Office**

**Office of the Assessor
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August 25, 2020

A Letter from the Assessor:

What a year so far and it is not close to being finished. The pandemic, like everywhere, created some strange approaches. For the Assessing Office, it changed the process of property valuation. We resorted to spending weeks inspecting properties by vehicle, while reporting physical changes back to the office by speakerphone to be input contemporaneously for further review upon returning to the office to maintain adequate social distancing. Belfast faced a rising real estate market. The summer gave us some insight into the ongoing stability of the market following April 1st, which is why the equalization process started in 2017 was continued to maintain uniformity and fairness among property owners.

This year, over 1300 of the almost 4000 real property accounts were reviewed. Upward and downward adjustments were made to assessed values of similarly situated properties to maintain our median assessed values within 10% of the estimated market value. Why was this done? In addition to the fairness aspect, this equalization process has allowed you, as property owners, to receive the full benefit of the Homestead and other exemptions, and for the City to receive full reimbursement from the State for all of the exemption programs. The focus remains on maintaining fair assessments and to strive toward incremental changes. In this year of Covid-19, however, I believe we can all agree that the focus is also on potential hardships.

Before I continue, I cannot stress enough; if you have a financial hardship or if you have had a large adjustment to the tax bill, please do not hesitate to contact the Assessing Office. We will be setting up phone calls, emails, zoom, mail, and in-person meetings as well as on-site inspections, though we need to be orderly and prudent with how we proceed. If necessary, we will refer you to General Assistance for additional guidance. We will communicate a methodical process to address questions and to coordinate inspections and adjustments, where warranted, while making sure everyone stays safe. If something is not reconciled by the first due date, please make the first payment and any adjustments, if warranted, will be made against the second bill. Abatement applications can be made within 185 days after the date of commitment.

The mill rate is increasing from 22.90 to 23.30, or 1.7%. Homestead exemptions increased from \$20,000 to \$25,000, resulting in \$582.50 in savings for those who qualified. Solar equipment exemptions were applied for the first time, with benefits as high as \$559.20 (or \$46.60 per month for you solar owners). If you have solar equipment installed, please contact us to confirm we have your exemption application since next year it may be taxed if we do not have an exemption application. Additionally, State reimbursement to Belfast for property reported under the business equipment tax exemption, or BETE, program increased this year from \$25.5 million to over \$27.9 million in value. At no cost to local taxpayers other than time, this results in a \$36,000 increase in revenues to the City versus last year, due, in large part, to the high increase in filers this year. Small filers add up.

Despite the pandemic, the Assessing Office completed curb-side inspection of almost all properties in Maps 1 through 5 and 14 through 16, covering over 51% of the territory of Belfast, making adjustments to the assessed values, in many cases, for the first time since 2003. The Assessing Office has now physically reviewed at least the exterior of over 91% of all properties and territory in Belfast since 2017, leaving only Map 8 and then the rural parts of East Side Belfast. Incremental increases to the contributory values of outbuildings, such as garages, workshops and sheds, were made throughout the City along with additional valuation captured from split lots, manufactured home sites, new construction, and renovation work. On that note, please make sure you obtain the benefit of a permit to ensure the quality of construction and accurate record-keeping for both fairness in taxes and insurance purposes. With improved uniformity in the assessments, it is increasingly apparent that the contributory value of single- and multi-family dwellings will be revisited for 2021 in an effort to maintain a 100% certified ratio. The stability of the real estate market will greatly influence this as we go into 2021.

None of this assessment activity offset the large loss in State revenue-sharing and anticipated local tax revenue (for car registrations, etc.) enough to reduce the mill rate. Due to Covid-19, the City experienced the equivalent of a 5.6% loss in previously projected State and Local revenue. For those with large property value increases this year in the rural areas covered, this means that you may not only have the increase in your assessment, but also the increase in the mill rate, mostly because of the pandemic, but also because many assessed values dated back to 2003. In these cases, the assessment may now be more accurate, but the resulting effective tax is higher than originally anticipated by this office when we started last fall. This is why I especially stress our wish to communicate with those with a large single-year adjustment – we want to ensure assessments are correct in relation to market value and to use our resources for assistance, where eligible.

We are still experiencing a decline in a certain office complex valuation due to market conditions. This tax burden shift has been largely absorbed by a mix of residential, existing commercial values, and offsetting increases in business equipment exemption reimbursement. The Assessing Office constantly strives to make assessed values fair and equitable.

Again, please contact us if concerned with any changes in your valuation. Make sure you have all exemptions for which you qualify. For business owners, we can walk you through the various state filing requirements and explain eligible exemptions. We appreciate emails or phone numbers for our records as we constantly are reaching out to property owners with questions or suggestions. If by chance you have received your tax bill for a property you have sold in the past six months, please forward to the new owner or contact us so we can make sure the current owner gets this bill and letter.

Finally, both the mapping data and the 2020 Commitment Book should be updated online by September 4th, 2020.

Thank you for your understanding.

Sincerely,



Brent Martin, CMA-4, CRA
City Assessor / Street Addressing Officer