

COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA
COMMITTEE ON FINANCE

Room 400, City Hall
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Tuesday, February 5, 2019
2:20 p.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCILWOMAN JANNIE L. BLACKWELL, CHAIR
COUNCIL PRESIDENT DARRELL L. CLARKE
COUNCILWOMAN CINDY BASS
COUNCILMAN ALLAN DOMB
COUNCILMAN WILLIAM K. GREENLEE
COUNCILMAN BOBBY HENON
COUNCILWOMAN CHERELLE L. PARKER
COUNCILMAN MARK SQUILLA

BILL 190004 - An ordinance amending Chapter 19-2900 of The Philadelphia Code, entitled "Senior Citizen Low Income Special Tax Provisions," by extending the deadline for low-income seniors to apply for a refund or forgiveness of Real Estate Taxes.

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2 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
3 you very much. The Committee on Finance
4 is called to order. We have a quorum:
5 President of City Council, Darrell
6 Clarke; Bobby Henon, Vice Chair; Bill
7 Greenlee; Cherelle Parker; and myself.

8 A quorum being present, we will
9 ask the Clerk to read the title of the
10 bill.

11 THE CLERK: An ordinance
12 amending Chapter 19-2900 of Title 19 of
13 The Philadelphia Code, entitled "Senior
14 Citizen Low Income Special Tax
15 Provisions," by extending the deadline
16 for low-income seniors to apply for a
17 refund or forgiveness of Real Estate
18 Taxes.

19 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
20 you very much.

21 We will now ask the Revenue
22 Commissioner, Frank Breslin, to come
23 forward.

24 (Witness approached witness
25 table.)

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2 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
3 you very much, and we appreciate you
4 being here. I ask that you identify
5 yourself for the record and make your
6 testimony.

7 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: Good
8 afternoon, Chairwoman Blackwell and
9 members of the Committee on Finance. I
10 am Frank Breslin, Revenue Commissioner
11 and Chief Collections Officer. Thank you
12 for the opportunity to testify today on
13 Bill No. 190004.

14 The bill amends Chapter 19-2900
15 of The Philadelphia Code, entitled
16 "Senior Citizen Low Income Special Tax
17 Provisions," by extending the deadline
18 for low-income seniors to apply for a
19 refund or forgiveness of Real Estate
20 Taxes. As amended, this bill extends the
21 deadline to apply for the Senior Citizen
22 Tax Freeze program to March 15th for this
23 tax year.

24 The Administration, like
25 Council, is committed to getting all

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2 eligible seniors enrolled in this
3 program. This program protects them from
4 rate and assessment increases, freezing
5 their annual real estate tax bill from
6 the time they enter the program for as
7 long as the property remains their
8 primary residence. Qualifying applicants
9 must meet certain age and income
10 criteria. As of December 2018, 18,170
11 qualifying homes were enrolled in the
12 Senior Citizen Tax Freeze program. Those
13 currently receiving a benefit from the
14 program will save on average \$569 on
15 their 2019 real estate tax bills.

16 In recent months, eligibility
17 for the Senior Citizen Tax Freeze program
18 has expanded, thanks to efforts from City
19 Council and the Commonwealth of
20 Pennsylvania. City Council Bill 180603
21 enacted in September 2018 expanded the
22 program to eligible seniors in co-op
23 buildings, while the Commonwealth
24 increased income limits for the program
25 in October.

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2 The Department of Revenue has
3 worked diligently to promote and
4 implement these changes. So far in
5 Fiscal Year 2019, Revenue representatives
6 have attended 114 community events,
7 published over a dozen social media
8 posts, performed door-to-door canvassing,
9 held workshops with co-op building
10 managers, worked with AARP and
11 Philadelphia Corporation for Aging to
12 spread the word, and distributed
13 informational materials to hundreds of
14 Registered Community Organizations.
15 These efforts have yielded over 900 new
16 applications for the program.

17 The current legal deadline for
18 the program is January 31st each year.
19 The deadline allows enough time to
20 receive and process applications, confirm
21 enrollment, and issue new bills before
22 the February 28th deadline for the one
23 percent early payment discount. Current
24 legislation allows the Department to
25 grant exceptions to the deadline for

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2 applicants experiencing hardship or other
3 valid reasons.

4 Given the changes in
5 assessments this year, we share the
6 sponsor's desire to give as much
7 opportunity as possible to potential
8 applicants to apply to freeze their bill
9 at the 2018 amount. Therefore, the
10 Administration supports Bill 190004 with
11 the amendment to extend the deadline to
12 March 15th for tax year 2019 only. This
13 one-time extension will give applicants
14 more time to analyze their tax bills and
15 assemble relevant support documentation.
16 Following this tax season, the Department
17 will evaluate the impact of the deadline
18 extension to determine if it would be
19 helpful in the future.

20 The Administration recognizes
21 the need to improve access to all
22 Philadelphians eligible for assistance
23 programs. We look forward to working
24 with City Council to help accomplish this
25 goal.

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2 Thank you for the opportunity
3 to testify, and I'm happy to answer any
4 questions.

5 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
6 you.

7 So to save the 569, what's the
8 average tax bill that seniors receive?

9 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: I don't
10 know the average tax bill for seniors. I
11 think the average tax bill -- don't hold
12 me to the number -- is roughly 2,400.
13 No. That might be a delinquency. Don't
14 hold me to that. I could check and we
15 can get that back to you.

16 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
17 you.

18 Questions?

19 Thank you very much. We note
20 that Councilman Squilla is here,
21 Councilman Domb, and we thank them for
22 being present. Councilwoman Bass as
23 well. Thank you very much.

24 Questions? Councilman Henon
25 and then Councilman Domb.

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2 COUNCILMAN HENON: Thank you,
3 Madam Chair.

4 And I just want to thank you
5 for all the due diligence that the
6 Department of Revenue and the City of
7 Philadelphia has performed, along with
8 this body, in ensuring that our senior
9 citizens get the fair opportunity for
10 those who were eligible in previous years
11 or not eligible in previous years now
12 eligible for the Senior Tax Freeze. I
13 think it's been an incredible effort.

14 I know some of the House
15 members of the State Representatives in
16 the City of Philadelphia and myself and a
17 few other Councilmembers have been trying
18 to pursue and urge the Commonwealth to
19 raise the eligibility, because it's out
20 of date here in the City of Philadelphia
21 and our seniors deserve better, and they
22 have a benefit now that is better and
23 equal to and consistent with 2019 other
24 programs that the state has to offer.

25 So we were a little behind the

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2 times, and Philadelphia is proud to be
3 caught up for the eligibility for our
4 seniors to enroll in this program, and
5 extending the time as we have here
6 through the opportunity through this
7 Committee and on the floor of this body
8 is extremely important.

9 So I just want to thank you for
10 your due diligence. I want to thank
11 every Councilmember. Make sure that we
12 don't stop here. We still have some
13 time, that we make sure that all
14 citizens, senior citizens, who were not
15 eligible before have the opportunity that
16 meet the qualifications that are
17 eligible, that they enroll in this
18 program immediately within the next two
19 months, because it's something to be
20 proud of and it makes us proud to be
21 Philadelphians, and it's proud for us as
22 elected officials to serve and offer
23 those kind of benefits. So good job and
24 congratulations.

25 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: Thanks

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2 for your support.

3 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
4 you. We agree.

5 Councilman Domb.

6 COUNCILMAN DOMB: Thank you,
7 Chairwoman Blackwell.

8 Good afternoon, Commissioner.

9 Just a quick question. I think you do
10 this already, but you'll know the income
11 level of the seniors for these tax
12 benefits, and my question, I guess, is
13 based on knowing the Earned Income Tax
14 Credit works best when they have children
15 under the age of 17, you still can get
16 just over \$500 if you're a single or
17 married couple if your income -- if you
18 have the income qualifications. And my
19 question is, when you know their income
20 based on the real estate taxes, do we do
21 some sort of cross-marketing to also let
22 them know about the Earned Income Tax
23 Credit and other benefits?

24 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: From our
25 standpoint, when we get taxpayers in for

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2 any of our relief programs, we kind of
3 try to do an analysis to see if they're
4 eligible for any other relief program and
5 also we do a lot of -- we talked about
6 the 114 outreach events. At those
7 events, we're plugging not just Senior
8 Tax Freeze, but all of the relief
9 programs, including Earned Income Tax
10 Credit, and that deserves a lot of
11 publicity because that is a very
12 effective tool in helping to alleviate
13 poverty.

14 COUNCILMAN DOMB: All right.

15 Thank you. Thank you very much.

16 Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

17 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL:

18 Councilman Squilla.

19 COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you,

20 Madam Chair.

21 On that line of thought, do we
22 also partner with other utilities and
23 look at people who apply like for LIHEAP
24 or water that may be eligible for also a
25 tax freeze?

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2 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: We do
3 partner with utilities and share
4 information and share information that we
5 can and share strategies to get people
6 into all of the available programs.

7 COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: All right.
8 We know there's more people out there
9 that are eligible and do not apply. So
10 we're trying to think of every possible
11 solution, especially with this Tax Freeze
12 knowing what's going on with OPA, and as
13 assessments keep increasing, it's harder
14 and harder for seniors and people in this
15 level to pay these taxes.

16 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: Agreed.
17 And that's why we've taken on such a
18 significant effort to partner with City
19 Council, with community organizations,
20 with faith-based organizations really to
21 get out there and get the information to
22 people about all of these programs. And
23 we realize that -- our communications
24 team I think has been doing a fantastic
25 job of taking a multi-pronged approach.

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2 So we do things through mail, through
3 advertising, through in-person, and
4 through community partners, because we
5 realize that one of the best ways to get
6 out there is through a partner that the
7 community has a lot of confidence in.

8 COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: I mean, I
9 know the number is 16,000-something. It
10 just seems like a small number.

11 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: We have
12 18,000 currently enrolled.

13 COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: 18,170.
14 All right. Thank you very much. Thanks
15 for your help.

16 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL:
17 Councilwoman Parker.

18 COUNCILWOMAN PARKER: Thank
19 you, Madam Chair.

20 And good afternoon, Commish.
21 Good to see you. Thanks for being here.

22 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: Hello.

23 COUNCILWOMAN PARKER: I want to
24 follow up on Councilman Squilla's line of
25 questioning. Thank you, first, for just

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2 giving us the facts with that number.
3 We've been asking, and now I can actually
4 say that 18,170 qualifying homes are
5 actually in the program.

6 My question to you is, with the
7 extension to March the 15th, do we have
8 or can we gouge that out at all
9 approximately how many more that we think
10 will by extending the deadline? So can
11 we quantify it at all?

12 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: No. I
13 think that's really what we want to do
14 and that's why we're making this
15 effective -- with this being effective
16 for one year, we'll really see how --
17 we'll measure at the end of this how
18 effective this was, because one of the
19 concerns we have is from Revenue's
20 standpoint, we're really pushing this now
21 at March 15th. We're pushing this up
22 against the deadline. So operationally
23 we have to get applications in. We have
24 to get them processed. We have to get
25 them approved. We have to get a new bill

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2 out and into the hands of the taxpayers
3 so they can pay by the due date. But we
4 share the goal of getting as many
5 enrolled. So we're going to take this on
6 this year, but then we really want to
7 measure the impact that this has.

8 Most of our outreach has been
9 geared towards getting people to apply
10 and apply early, because our goal is
11 really if we can get them to apply for
12 the program by about mid September, then
13 by the time the original real estate bill
14 goes out in early December, it will
15 already reflect their tax freeze. Now
16 taxpayers have a bill in their hand which
17 doesn't reflect the tax freeze. If they
18 apply, we'll get them processed, we'll
19 get a new bill out to them, but then
20 they'll also have two bills in their
21 hand, which might create a little bit of
22 confusion. So we really want to measure
23 how this works. And with so many of
24 our -- so much of our outreach being in
25 person, it really gives us the

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2 opportunity to talk to a lot of citizens
3 and see how things work. So we really
4 want to measure this and see how
5 effective it is.

6 COUNCILWOMAN PARKER: Your
7 response just now, Commish, brings me to
8 my second question. You published over a
9 dozen social media posts, door-to-door
10 canvassing, workshops, you worked with
11 AARP, Philadelphia Corporation for the
12 Aging, and then you said this effort has
13 yielded over 900 new applications to the
14 program. Is this number, does Revenue
15 know, is this number the largest number
16 of seniors in what I say may be the past
17 two Administrations who are enrolled? I
18 would be interested as a newer member of
19 this body to say, hey, this is my first
20 term here in the City Council of
21 Philadelphia. Have we done a better job
22 at getting senior citizens enrolled in
23 this program versus prior
24 Administrations? Because I always want
25 to measure what are we doing with

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2 progress. Are we trending up or are we
3 sort of flat. And with the outreach
4 efforts that you have described, it will
5 be interesting to see if that additional
6 direct person-to-person contact, if that
7 is what is responsible for increasing
8 participation.

9 So if you don't have the answer
10 now, fine, but if you can forward that
11 information back to the Chair Lady, that
12 would be important for me.

13 COMMISSIONER BRESLIN: We will.
14 Thank you.

15 COUNCILWOMAN PARKER: Thank
16 you.

17 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL:
18 Councilman Henon.

19 COUNCILMAN HENON: Thank you,
20 Madam Chair.

21 And, Commissioner, I think
22 Councilwoman Parker is correct. We try
23 to measure the rate of return on more
24 enrollments and compared to the type of
25 outlets that we reach out to and how we

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2 communicate, and we will. I mean, we'll
3 have that. You'll have this evidence
4 base throughout by our budget process
5 here in the City, and we look forward to
6 that. This is no different than when
7 we're out there promoting homestead
8 exemption for people who own homes and
9 really trying to get people in an
10 outreach program to get on the books.
11 And for Councilmembers and City folks who
12 were out there in the community, our
13 senior groups are extremely active. I
14 promote the Senior Tax Freeze every
15 single week, every single senior group
16 meeting that not just I go to but my
17 office, and this -- I'd rather have a
18 complicated situation where they're
19 looking at two things. That means that
20 the paperwork is getting to them. And
21 the seniors are smart, right? They'll
22 call and say, hey, what is this? I want
23 to go with the bigger and better benefit.

24 So I would just continue for
25 all members, keep hounding, keep visiting

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2 your senior groups. I do it. I promote
3 this all the time, and I really look
4 forward to seeing the growth of people
5 who were eligible now that weren't
6 before. Because in my seven years, seven
7 and a half years on Council here, and
8 it's not going to change in the next
9 seven and a half years of Council in the
10 future, you're going to see people who
11 just fall short about \$100 or \$200 of
12 being eligible for a Senior Tax Freeze,
13 and this extension allows those who were
14 in the previous FY18 fiscal year who were
15 not eligible who are eligible now.

16 So I'm going to say you're
17 going to see an initial growth if
18 everybody continues to stay in touch with
19 their senior groups, because I'm going to
20 do the same, and I think it's a great
21 thing.

22 Thanks.

23 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
24 you.

25 Are there more questions for

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2 Commissioner Breslin?

3 (No response.)

4 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
5 you very much.

6 We're now going to call forward
7 Alice Wright. She is our constituent for
8 senior citizens. We'd like her to
9 introduce herself and her organization
10 and then testify for the seniors who you
11 represent. Thank you for being here, Ms.
12 Wright.

13 (Witness approached witness
14 table.)

15 MS. WRIGHT: Thank you. Good
16 afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the
17 Council Finance Committee. Thank you for
18 this opportunity to testify today. My
19 name is Alice Wright and I'm the
20 President of United Block Captains
21 Association citywide. I also am a
22 low-income senior in the Senior Tax
23 Freeze program. However, I would like to
24 testify on to support the Bill 190004
25 extending the deadline for seniors to

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2 apply for the Tax Freeze program.

3 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
4 you very much.

5 Any questions?

6 (No response.)

7 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: We
8 want to thank Ms. Wright for being here,
9 for being willing to speak for so many
10 people who can't speak for themselves and
11 for doing such a good job to take care of
12 your blocks and your seniors. Thank you
13 very much.

14 MS. WRIGHT: And thank you,
15 Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell. Also I
16 would like to say that extending this
17 program would be very useful, because I
18 ran into about three or four seniors this
19 morning that had no knowledge of this
20 program. So they were very upset,
21 because one of the seniors received a
22 letter from the Tax Revenue stating that
23 they didn't even owe taxes, and I said,
24 everybody pays city tax. So, therefore,
25 by extending this program, we would be

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2 able to help them get on this program and
3 to find out why they received a letter
4 stating that they do not owe any taxes
5 for 2019.

6 I thank you so very much.
7 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
8 you.

9 Any questions?
10 (No response.)
11 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Thank
12 you very much.

13 We will now conclude the
14 hearing and enter our stated meeting for
15 this Finance Committee.

16 The Chair recognizes Councilman
17 Henon for a motion.

18 COUNCILMAN HENON: Thank you,
19 Madam Chair. I offer an amendment to
20 Bill No. 190004. A copy of the amendment
21 has been circulated to all members of the
22 Committee. I move that the amendment to
23 Bill No. 190004 be approved.

24 (Duly seconded.)

25 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: It has

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2 been moved and properly seconded that the
3 amendment to Bill No. 190004 be approved.

4 All those in favor of the
5 motion will signify by saying aye.

6 (Aye.)

7 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: Those
8 opposed?

9 (No response.)

10 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: The
11 ayes have it, the motion carries, and the
12 amendment to Bill No. 190004 has been
13 approved.

14 The Chair now recognizes
15 Councilmember Henon for a motion on Bill
16 No. 190004, as amended.

17 COUNCILMAN HENON: Thank you,
18 Madam Chair. I move that Bill No.
19 190004, as amended, be reported from this
20 Committee with a favorable recommendation
21 and further move that the rules of
22 Council be suspended as to permit the
23 first reading of this bill at our next
24 session of Council.

25 (Duly seconded.)

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2 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: It has
3 been moved and properly seconded that
4 Bill No. 190004, as amended, be reported
5 from this Committee with a favorable
6 recommendation and further moved that the
7 rules of Council be suspended so as to
8 permit first reading of this bill at the
9 next session of Council.

10 All those in favor of the
11 motion will signify by saying aye.

12 (Aye.)

13 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL:
14 Opposed?

15 (No response.)

16 COUNCILWOMAN BLACKWELL: The
17 ayes have it, the motion carries, and
18 Bill No. 190004, as amended, will be
19 reported from this Committee with a
20 favorable recommendation and also a
21 request that the rules of Council be
22 suspended so as to permit first reading
23 at the next session of Council.

24 I thank you all. Thank you for
25 your attendance. We will adjourn this

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2 Committee hearing. Thank you all for
3 your testimony, and that will be the end
4 of our deliberations today.

5 (Committee on Finance concluded
6 at 2:45 p.m.)

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CERTIFICATE

I HEREBY CERTIFY that the
proceedings, evidence and objections are
contained fully and accurately in the
stenographic notes taken by me upon the
foregoing matter, and that this is a true and
correct transcript of same.

MICHELE L. MURPHY
RPR-Notary Public

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