COUNCIL OF THE CITY OF PHILADELPHIA

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Penn's Landing Caterer's
1301 S. Christopher Columbus Blvd.
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Wednesday, April 17, 2013
6:24 p.m.

PRESENT:

COUNCIL PRESIDENT DARRELL L. CLARKE
COUNCILMAN CURTIS JONES, JR., CHAIR
COUNCILMAN BOBBY HENON
COUNCILMAN WILLIAM K. GREENLEE
COUNCILMAN KENYATTA JOHNSON
COUNCILMAN DENNIS O'BRIEN
COUNCILWOMAN MARIA D. QUINONES-SANCHEZ
COUNCILMAN MARK SQUILLA

BILL NOS. 130178, 130179, 130180

RESOLUTION NO. 130190

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COUNCILMAN JONES: I'd like to ask everyone to please be seated.

This is a continuation of the public hearing on the Committee of the Whole regarding Bill Numbers 130178, 130179, 130180, and Resolution Number 130190.

This evening we will continue the Committee of the Whole to consider various bills read by the secretary that constitutes proposed operation and capital spending measures for fiscal year 2014 -- a capital program -- and a forward-looking plan for fiscal year 2015 through fiscal year 2019.

Since you've been entrusted as a legislative body, as stewards, and taxpayers, I firmly believe that all spending measures should be reflective of your priorities. And, you know, this is Council President Clarke's words, but we also concur.

We're here this evening to

continue that deliberation and process. This body would like to hear from you, and that we have -- I'm going to say it in my own words.

We're here to really prioritize --

(Council President Clarke enters.)

COUNCILMAN JONES: Just in time.

So we're here to hear from you. This is a continuation of what actually President Clarke, before he became president, insisted upon, which was community engagement, to really hear what the people who actually pay the bills think about the process, what things can we do better, and what things we're doing, on occasion, well.

So without further ado, we would like to start. And I would like to take this moment to thank Penn's Landing Catering and the Sheet Metal Workers Union, Local Number 19,

including Gary Masino, President -- he'll kill me, because I know him -- and business manager Joe Rispo, political director.

I would like to extend a special thank you for hosting this to Councilman Squilla, whose district this is, and I would hope that he will say a few words to get us started.

Also recognizing President Councilman Clarke, Councilman Henon, Councilman Greenlee, and Councilwoman Sanchez.

And with that, Councilman Squilla?

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you, President.

I would like to thank everybody for coming out here tonight. Unfortunately, there must have been an accident on 95 that caused a lot of traffic along Delaware Avenue, and I'm sure there will be more people surfacing and coming in tonight. But

we wanted to get started and try to get rolling and get as much information out as possible.

Thank you for coming out here tonight in the first district. Last year we had a meeting shared by myself and Councilwoman Sanchez up in the northern end which was very well attended, and we got a lot out of it.

And we're hoping to also get a lot out of this hearing from the people in the community to hear what you have to say and how important it is for your words to us so that we're able to take that information and move forward with legislation to make your lives, hopefully, easier.

This is a tough year this year. It's a tough budget season. Last year we went through it with AVI and ended up having to delay it. This year we're moving forward with AVI and are still running into some similar problems.

So we look forward to your input, your questions, your concerns. And, hopefully, we, at the end of the day today, will have more information and be able to move forward in legislation that would make Philadelphia a better place to work, live, and have fun.

So thank you, and I'm looking forward to the start of the hearing.

There's also a sign-up sheet on my right-hand side, your left, in front of the red tablecloth there with the red skirt. Feel free if anybody wants to present anything or testify today, please sign up. We have a list of some people who have already signed up, and we will take that list after the initial people who have already signed.

Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: I will be relatively quick because I

know you guys want to get started.

First, I apologize. I got caught up in that traffic jam, and I made the mistake of turning into the neighborhood. I pretty much out-slicked myself, and I said, I'll go around and come back up. And on my way back up it was worse on this side than it was on the other side. So my apologies for being a little late.

First, I want to thank Councilman Squilla for hosting this meeting.

It's clearly a very challenging time for all of us and particularly those neighborhoods that are going to have some significant challenges as it relates to this whole AVI process.

Councilman Squilla has probably logged more minutes and more miles in his council district dealing with this issue than any of us. So we really believe it was appropriate for

us to be here on our first neighborhood budget meeting. So we are here to listen to you.

As we said earlier, we do listen. We had a meeting last night in Council Chambers where people were discussing some of the challenges that they've had in their communities. And there was this one gentleman who stood up and thought somehow that we didn't understand what it was like to live in a neighborhood.

I had to remind him that I grew up in North Philadelphia. This gentleman grew up in West Philadelphia. Councilman Squilla grew up in South Philly. I mean, we're all from the neighborhood. So we understand the challenges.

And at the end of the day, we hope that we can be responsive to your needs and your issues. And, hopefully, we can, at the end of the day, come up with a reasonable

productive product. So with that, I thank you very much.

And the first witness -- I have to give the ground rules. Sorry.

When you come in a half-hour late, you're a little reluctant to give ground rules.

Basically, what we like to do traditionally in these meetings, we want to make sure that everybody has an opportunity to speak. So we would like, if at all possible, for you to limit your testimony to three minutes. And there may be some back and forth between the councilperson and yourself and some potential follow-up. But we always want to make sure -- we actually keep a time limit on council members, because we can get somewhat lengthy.

So, if at all possible, if you can adhere to those guidelines, then, hopefully, we can get through this and give everybody a chance to speak.

With that, thank you very much. At this time, we'll call the first witness.

MS. LEWIS: We're calling three names: Rene Goodwin, Margaret Kalalian, and Susan Patrone.

MS. GOODWIN: Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen of the Council and fellow Philadelphians.

It's always a privilege to have an opportunity to testify before all of you. We value this.

Yesterday the Crosstown Coalition of Taxpayers, which consists of 22 civics throughout Philadelphia, mostly in areas hit hardest by AVI, held a joint press conference with four members of City Council, including Councilpersons Blackwell, Johnson, Kenney, and Squilla.

For those who were not present at that press conference, I will review for you briefly some of the points made.

The administration has not released information on the formulas used to determine the assessments in spite of the request to do so. Based on the data that we do have in hand, our analysts believe that there is a wider margin of error than reported by OPA.

There appears to be a range of irregularities and inconsistencies too numerous to mention at this short time.

It is therefore suggested that a commission be established consisting of statisticians, real estate professionals, public policy professionals, and civic leaders to do a thorough evaluation on how the system is intended to be implemented to make sure it is fair and accurate, which is what was promised, and transparent, I might add.

The truth is that even when AVI is made right, there will remain a

strong need for remedies for those who face large increases. But at this point, there is no point to putting Band-Aids on what is a large wound.

In my own community of Pennsport, there is evidence of similar or identical properties on the same blocks having been assessed at different values. And as gentrification, in the 100 block of Federal Street, the 100 Block of Elsworth, and the 100 Block of Alter, you have a total of 61 percent that are the new construction tax abated. 61 percent.

And yet consistently in those new properties the land value has been reduced under the current assessment process, as has been the property value, to the tune of $100,000 each.

Finally, Philadelphia is at a crossroads as a city with developments such as that occurring

along the Waterfront and other visionary projects.

We stand on the verge of creating a new vitality in this city. But in some respects, it's like being at war, and in any war, there are casualties. In this instance, we fear the casualties may be the poor, the working poor, and the middle class. Please, don't sacrifice them in attempts to achieve the vision. For, if you do, you will have to build a wall around the new construction, tax-abated, high-end properties to keep out the current threats of urban crime and danger.

What do you want to see for your city? What are you willing to work for? Remember, we need you. We are with you. We are behind you because you represent us. We appreciate all that you do. Let's move forward in a fair and transparent way for all.

Thank you.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Councilman Squilla?

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you, Mr. President.

My question is: You stated about a commission that would be able to oversee. Is this something that you want the City to enact as the Crosstown Coalition? Or would it be something that the Crosstown Coalition would like to put together to go over the statistical results of the OPA?

MS. GOODWIN: I think, in all fairness and reasonableness, it has to be somewhat of a joint effort. We, as the Crosstown Coalition, are taxpayers, but we can't pretend that we do not have a government representing us. But because there seems to be such a widespread, let's say, question, at the very best, I think we really need

to come together and find the best of all worlds.

This is not a you-and-I situation, Councilman Squilla. We are all in this together.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you.

MS. KALALIAN: Council members, thank you for coming into our neighborhoods and giving us an opportunity to meet you and to --

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you. Just make sure you state your name, just for the record.

MS. KALALIAN: Oh. My name is Margaret Kalalian.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you.

MS. KALALIAN: -- and so we can have a dialogue and get to understand what your issues are and our issues are.

Right now, the issue that seems to really be of most concern is the assessments under the AVI. And I wanted to try and bring this down to more of a human level. So I put together -- and it was in your press kits yesterday -- this handout about land values in Queen Village.

I lived in Queen Village for about a year before I moved to East Passyunk Crossing. So I happen to be a little familiar with the fact that on the 100 block of Queen Street there's a magnificent, and I mean magnificent, property, that was originally a firehouse. It was zoned in Number 3. And I have a picture of it from 1896, which I didn't include in the packet.

The property was going into disrepair, and to make the history really brief -- and it's on there, I had it highlighted -- I think it was 1987 that the CEO of Conrail purchased it and turned it into a 100 percent

residence. It's a three-parcel property and, eventually, he purchased the next three parcels next to it. And he built a three-quarter replica of the original building.

And in front of it, because there was a firehouse, there is this fantastic statue of a fireman and his dog in honor of our brave Philadelphia Firemen who have served our communities.

The problem that I encountered, because I was looking for comps -- we're told we have to look for comps within our GMAs. So I just stumbled on this in trying to determine what comparable value in Queen Village -- because my son lives there and owns a property very close by.

I saw that the AVI, or the OPA, had assessed that particular property that has 5,875 square feet at $2.89 a square foot. And if you look at the record -- oh, I have -- if

somebody wants to take that. I didn't know how many people were going to be here. I didn't make a lot of copies. But you do have them.

But what they did from last year is they reduced the assessed value of the land from $43,811 to $17,000. That's where the $2.89 comes from.

The very next property next door to it, which is also a small historic house, with much smaller square footage, had a square foot value of $27.39.

And at the end of the block where Queen meets Front, there are three contemporary houses. And even though they're next door to each other, one of them has a land value of $40.60, and the one next to it is $25.90 a square foot. Now, if you're not confused by that, we certainly are.

If the homeowner is supposed to provide comps to the OPA properties in their area, what are we

comparing them to?

I called OPA and I said, can you help me with this? Could you tell me why there are different land values on the same block?

And the very nice lady said, can you give me a block.

And I said, yes, check this block out.

And she looked at it and she said, no, that's not right. She said, let me call you back. I'll do a little research. And she called me back and she said, well, I looked at some other data bases. And she said, I'm seeing a number of $43, but that doesn't even sound right. So I can't tell you what the right dollar number is for land by square foot on one block in Queen Village.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Not to cut you off, but we have a number to get through.

We've seen in all of our

districts throughout the City cases where there's been a significant disparity in properties, same size, built at the same time. And today we haven't gotten a reasonable explanation as to how you came up with these comps. Or in the case where there are no comps, how you came up with these values.

We like to talk about this one conversation during the course of a hearing when Mr. McKeithen, the head of OPA, talked about predictive analysis. So he basically was predicting what the property in a neighborhood was going to sell for, because there were no comparables. And, unfortunately, his prediction went from $45,000 to 454. So it was quite an aggressive prediction.

And we then started talking about this whole process of industry standard, which is a term that's been thrown out there every time we start

questioning the process.

There will be a callback. Part of this process is that we hear from you, and in very specific terms, we are going to ask for very specific responses to individual analysis.

One of the things that we realize when you ask a conceptual or general question, it's very easy to give you a response of, well, we have predictive values. But if you ask in very specific terms, you take property X and tell me how you took that property and got that number, you have to detail in a very detailed way, tell me what process you used so you can fully anticipate that level of questioning from the gentlemen.

So we're also having some conversations about how some of these problems can be remedied if we found out that the prediction actually turned out not to be true.

So we're looking at all of

the different challenges associated with some of these disparities in these property assessments. And, hopefully, we'll come up with something that makes sense.

But we understand it. I mean, every district we have cases where there are challenges where they simply can't explain it beyond saying, we've kept the industry standard.

So we hear you. And we're looking into it, and we're going to try to come up with some kind of reasonable answer.

MS. KALALIAN: That's encouraging. I do want to point out that this particular example on this particular block is not isolated.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: That's what I just said.

MS. KALALIAN: Because I checked another block, which is the block where my son actually has his property, and there was exactly the

same breakdown. There is a two-lot parcel that has one-story garages on it. They've been there for years. They're built so that houses could be supported by the foundation of the garages. That property also breaks down to $2.88. It's across the street from my son's duplex. The contemporary row house right next to that lot comes in the $25-or-so square footage. And his lot is at $40 a square foot.

This is a carriage street in Queen Village that has no sidewalks and just about enough room for a car to drive by. So why are we seeing these kinds of --

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: What you can --

MS. KALALIAN: So we're trying to say that these are not isolated examples. These are systemic issues. It comes from how these formulas have been developed which we've asked the OPA to provide for us.

And I just want to finish --

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: You're way --

MS. KALALIAN: I just want to finish because --

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Ma'am, with all --

MS. KALALIAN: I have a couple questions for you because --

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Ma'am. Ma'am. Ma'am, there was a three-minute time limit, and you're working on minute 15.

MS. KALALIAN: I'm sorry.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: I'm just saying, everybody needs to have an opportunity to speak. But we get your point. Trust me. Believe me. I understand. Thank you, ma'am.

MS. PATRONE: Good evening. My name is Susan Patrone.

And I've lived in South Philadelphia all my life. In fact, my

children will be fourth generation. And part of the reason why I'm here is I hope that we can help make our city a place not just for them to be able to afford to live, but for all our families and children.

I find it hard because I like to begin in so many places, but I'll start with what I have.

First, welcome to all members of Council. Thank you for coming. It's really nice to meet you folks.

I gave out a GMA map this evening. There's two levels of inaccuracy or, let's say, I believe, two examples of shoddy work that's systemic and endemic within OPA's methodology. And I would like to first look at the map with you guys, and I would like to show everyone else.

First, I was told this was a geographical mapping area. Then the term changed to geographical marking

area. So either way, it shakes out as a GMA.

The GMAs are an important component to any citizen who would like to make some comps with their properties or any other properties if they want to make an appeal.

So when you go to OPA's website, it takes several clicks to even go to assessments, property assessment data, GMAs. The little click -- the little map click is in the paragraph.

Okay. This is a level of what I call a real problem. First of all, it's difficult to find on the OPA website. And when you look at this map, we know it's South Philly somewhere. And it's kind of impossible to recognize the streets. You kind of have to guess. And if you want to make the comps with your GMA, you have to kind of know where that is. You have to know where your block is in that.

The map basically shows nothing. That's what I'm getting at. And there's at least nine or ten of these on that website. So when you go to that area, it's like -- I call it bibbidi-bobbidi-boo, because I really don't know where it is. And I don't see it as a real tool to help the citizen make an informed decision.

And not only that, the OPA -- there's at least nine or ten of the maps on the website that cut up into 650 or so GMA -- these marketing areas. From my understanding from our gentleman, Wolf Spencer, with Crosstown Coalition, other cities have a range of between 50 and 70.

So when I see 650, you know, I'm not going to draw any conclusions here, but it sounds like they're going to be real specific on how much money they're going to get from each area.

Now, secondly, getting back

to what I believe are endemic and systemic, really the big problems with OPA. It was my honor to be at the Crosstown Coalition conference yesterday. And the information that was presented, and the Council's questions, it was one of the best events I ever attended.

Anyway, some of the conclusions I'm going to give you bulleted from the Crosstown Coalition of Taxpayers, which, to me, is the underlying stuff to this superficial stuff that you find on the website.

Okay. What this Crosstown Coalition of Taxpayers found was land value is too low. There's conclusive evidence.

Abated value was lower than non-abated land values, and there's conclusive evidence for this.

High assessment disparity across GMA boundaries, there's evidence.

Large commercial properties undervalued, strong evidence.

Two to four units undervalued versus two-family, very strong evidence.

One-family, very strong evidence.

Now, this one, this comes from a person who has a hard time reading her check when I get paid. I do know that half of it gets eaten up. But I will let you know, the actual coefficient dispersion, much larger than national standards.

Basically, what this means is that there should be a 15 percent differential between assessments and what they sold for. And the Crosstown Coalition is finding that the OPAs are eight times higher than national standards.

So we have evidence. Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE:

During yesterday's hearings -- I don't know if any of you were there.

MS. PATRONE: Yes, we were.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: So we had actually asked for information that the Crosstown Coalition had put together so as a part of our analysis and as a part of our interaction with our administration, we can have a better understanding of what your analysis showed and the questions that you have.

So I just wanted to make sure that we do get that information, because we will have not only a couple of private conversations, but some public conversations with them.

MS. GOODWIN: I can answer that by saying that there is preliminary analysis done based on the data that we're able to secure.

There's additional analyses taking place which we are optimistically looking for within the

next two to three weeks. And I assure you, sir, you shall be first on our distribution list.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you so much.

MS. PATRONE: Can I make one more comment?

You've got three women here who can rap, I guess you can tell.

I've been involved civically 20 years now, and I feel like we're at the point in our city's history where we have the capacity built for trust and for the development of relationships based on the very best kinds of things for citizens and government to work together for this.

I see this as an opportunity. Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you so much for your testimony.

MS. LEWIS: The next three speakers: Reverend Ken Metzner, Beth McConnell, and Daphne McKissick.

REVEREND METZNER: Good evening.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Good evening.

REVEREND METZNER: My name is Ken Metzner. I want to thank the seven members of council who have come down here tonight. I would say that it is a little bit concerning to me as a citizen that only seven of the 17 members are here tonight. This is, as I understand it, the most important tax policy issue facing the City of Philadelphia in about the last 50 years.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: You shouldn't take the absence of council members to mean that they don't care. The City of Philadelphia is a big city, and a lot of members have actually indicated that when we scheduled this hearing they would not be available because they're doing other things in their district.

But trust me, the members are really engaged. I just don't want you to think that because they're not here they don't care about this issue.

REVEREND METZNER: Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: I'm sorry, sir. Go ahead.

REVEREND METZNER: There's a significant legal compliance issue that concerns me as a citizen, as an attorney, as a minister, and I think that perhaps council has not really focused on it.

But back in 2009 when council was setting the parameters for the new office of property assessment, this council amended Title 2, Section 305, establishing the office of property assessment. And in subsection 2D, it set forth certain requirements of the Office of Property Assessment, including that the chief assessment officer needed to post the

methodologies and the practices and the standards and the measurements including for the coefficient of dispersion and the price-related differential and other industry standards.

Neither citizens nor council should have to go on bended knee to the Office of Property Assessment and request that they kindly provide this information. The law requires it.

So it's disturbing to me, as it is to many of my fellow citizens, that we do not have this information. And how council could be kept in the dark on this critical, essential, legally mandated information is unacceptable.

How the Office of Property Assessment can ask council to make decisions of this magnitude while failing to comply with the spirit and the letter of the law is unacceptable.

So I, as a citizen, served the Right to Know Law Request on the Office of Property Assessment. I served several in the past few years. And, of course, they took the full 37 days to respond. Today I received about 1,000 pages of undifferentiated documents from the Office of Property Assessment.

And if I may continue, one, just one of the documents that I was able to look at today, because I received them at 4:30, prepared by the Office of Property Assessments, is called, Measuring the Accuracy of AVI Values. And now, this is a document that the Office of Property Assessment itself prepared. And in the few minutes that I have had to look at this, it's quite clear that when it comes to single-family residences, the Office of Property Assessments divided the City into 14 zones.

According to the OPA's own

analysis, 8 out of the 14 zones fail the national industry standards for accuracy.

31.5 percent of single-family homes in Philadelphia -- that's over 100,000 properties -- according to the OPA, are not valued correctly within industry standards.

And this information needs to be made available to citizens and to council. And the fact that the OPA has been, in my view, stonewalling council and trying to push council up to the June 30th deadline, by which, you know, a budget needs to be adopted, without providing this essential information is completely unacceptable.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

MS. McCONNELL: Good evening.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Good evening.

MS. McCONNELL: Thank you

for the opportunity to testify. My name is Beth McConnell. I'm the policy director of the Philadelphia Association of Community Development Corporations, PACDC. And I'm also a South Philadelphia homeowner, but I may be the one that is not going to talk about AVI tonight.

But we would certainly appreciate the opportunity to come back later in the week and talk to you about the effects -- talk about the slated property tax bills that you're going to have some hearings on later in the week and proposals about how we can protect our low-income homeowners at this point.

PACDC is a city-wide association of 100 organizations, including 45 community development corporations, CDC, that have extensive experience working to revitalize Philadelphia's neighborhoods while addressing the needs of local

residents.

This evening, given the dramatic increases in state and federal resources that the City receives, tonight we would like to urge council to allocate an additional $5 million from the City's general fund for housing and neighborhood economic development purposes.

Federal and state funding for community development and affordable housing have been dramatically cut over the last few years. In fact, the City's annual Federal Community Development Block Grant, as you know is CDBG, as well as home allocations have been cut by a combined $32.8 million just since FY09. That represents about 59 percent of the proposed FY14 budget for those two programs. And over that same period of time, state funding for community development and housing have been cut by another $8.9 million.

While Recovery Act Funds and increases in the Housing Trust Fund have helped to fill in some of those gaps, the City's overall annual budget for housing and community development has been cut by more than $39 million since FY09. That includes the projected effects on the sequester on the FY14 budget. And, unfortunately, as we know, more cuts could be coming.

President Obama's FY14 proposed budget includes another $215 million in cuts for the CDBG and the home program, which, of course, will trickle down to more cuts locally.

But in addition to that, the City's general fund contributions have decreased dramatically in terms of affordable housing and community development.

During the Nutter Administration, general fund dollars for the Office of Housing and Community Development, OHCD, have been cut by

more than $2.4 million. And to put that in perspective, that's more than this year's entire proposed general fund allocation OHCD.

And inadequate resources, general fund resources for housing and community development also result in less money on the street for our community development housing programs, because in order to keep staffing levels at OHCD adequate to meet the agency's programatic and administrative demands, the City has to divert an even greater percentage of the federal grant funds away from working communities and towards administration and staffing.

And, in fact, that's increased by about 37 percent of CDBG Funds in FY08 to a projected 45 percent in FY14, again, of CDBG funds that are not going on the street but are paying for administrative and programatic staffing of it.

Now, we do believe that the

work of the staff at City housing and community development agencies is important, which is why general funds need to either contribute a greater share to the agency's administration budget, or even better, ideally, provide more flexible funds so more of the federal dollars can go to the excellent work of CDCs and other community development organizations.

And I can give you some bullet points on some of the programs that will specifically be cut, if you'd like, but I know I've got to move it along. So I'll skip that now.

You know, and again, there are some significant restrictions on how federal funds can be used, and that makes many CDCs ineligible for CDBG money. Some more flexible grant funding could help them invest in street-scaping -- or flexible general fund money, street-scape improvements, cleaning and greening of our commercial

corridors as well.

We do understand that there are enormous demands for general fund resources, but investments in community development return rewards to Philadelphia.

Recent study demonstrated that CDCs over the last 20 years have contributed more than $3.3 billion to the local economy. More than 12,000 jobs and $28 million in city taxes. So we think it's an investment worth making.

Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you so much for your testimony.

Real briefly, with respect to the challenges associated with the continued reduction and funding from the federal government, particularly our block grant dollars, all of us have said on a consistent basis that at some point you have to come up with other strategies.

We talk about utilizing some of the City's assets, some things that might actually be viewed as liabilities in some respects, you know, vacant lands, publicly owned vacant lands, delinquencies. But the reality is those things can be turned into subsidies.

So I think you'll see coming out of this Council in very short order a series of strategies to allow us to utilize additional assets above and beyond the traditional block grant dollars, because for the foreseeable future, particularly if the sequester does kick in and actually becomes permanent, we have to figure out a different way. We can't continue to just cut back on those most in need. So we agree with you 100 percent.

MS. McKISSICK: Good evening. My name is Daphne McKissick. I'm just a citizen wanting to bring my voice. We appreciate you guys having

this community meeting.

My voice just is with regard to the education for our future. I know that everyone here is working diligently to make certain that there is a good education base for our children. But then when we have to look at schools closing, what does that say for the future of Philadelphia?

In addition to that, off that topic and on to the city workers who are laboring to maintain the tax base for your city, there are many city workers that are working without contract.

And so, as far as you being elected officials, you are to represent the constituents. And, in my opinion, as a citizen, not having a contract for citizens who are working in your city for a four-year period, to me, is deplorable.

And that's just my voice for today. There's no statistical data

for me, except that if you're working with a salary base from 2008, how do you maintain proper living standards? And then you want to go ahead and infringe on the citizens additional taxes for property?

And so there's a lot of things -- it's a cycle that seems to be developing. And we know that you individuals are working to create a budget, but, realistically, are you really looking at the individuals in our society who are living below poverty level? Those who are working are living below poverty level. So it's just an opinion as a statement.

If you are committed to your citizens, how then do we continue this cycle where our children are not being educated properly? How then do we continue to not have contracts for your city workers? You're representing them. How do we, as council members, give ourselves a raise within a time

frame when we did not give our city workers a contract?

Basically, that's it. Short and sweet. Just a statement.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you.

Councilman Squilla?

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: It's a difficult assumption, but on council, we are plagued with so many different roles and moving across our districts and throughout the City where we meet with different departments and people who need different things, and we try to mold all of that into what we think is best for the City.

So I know myself, speaking for myself, we always take the concerns of the residents. And I'm willing to meet with all the residents to come up with what their concerns are and also to work with them to come up with solutions.

I always ask people when

they have concerns. I'll say, well, what way do you think we can fix this situation, or, what do you think we can do better. And a lot of times, the solution comes out of the dialogue that we have and/or conversations or meetings with other council members or, you know, other residents.

And so, I mean, I'm willing to sit down with everybody and work out different scenarios of how things can get done. But our focus for this year I know has been mainly the taxes. And sometimes we overlook other things that are important to everyone. And so it's something that needs to be brought to our attention and worked on going forward.

MS. McKISSICK: I understand. The only thing is, how do you overlook not giving your workers in the City a contract for four years? How do you overlook that?

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: I'm

not overlooking that. We are pressed, and we have pressed the administration time and time again to make this happen. And I believe at least one PICA board member made a statement last year that said that if there was no contract, that they wouldn't approve our budget.

Now, that's a dramatic step. Now, that's only one of the PICA members who made that statement. And if he's going to follow through, we'll be able to see that.

There's no reason not to have a contract after four years. We have the issue with the City workers. We also have the firefighters. To me, there's no excuse for that. There's no reason that we can't bring somebody in to help if you're not able to negotiate that on your own, to bring help in to be able to get people in the City to help you negotiate these things. If they are sticking points that are in

the way, how do we mitigate those sticking points, and how do we move around the situation where we can come to a conclusion.

Anytime we have an agreement or disagreement, there's going to be people that are going to go away from the table mad, but at least they go away from the table knowing something got done.

We've been just kicking the can down the road for the last four years. And I think most people here on council have really, really pressured the administration to try to come up with a resolve. And I know our president has even offered to help with negotiations to try to get to an answer. And at this point, we haven't got there, not to say we haven't tried.

And I don't think -- I really do think that this time is going to be very interesting if you try to submit a budget without having a

contract. I know people here on council are not going to be happy. And I have a hard time believing that the PICA board would approve that.

So moving forward, we have support, I believe, from most of council here, and the president can speak on his behalf of how he tried to help and maybe not so much interject himself into the conversation, but offered his assistance in trying to resolve the situation. And I think any member here on council would do the same.

It's a sad situation that we have here in the City. And, hopefully, moving forward, we can get it resolved.

MS. McKISSICK: I would agree, because you are a major city. And so there is no reason why there should be a city that is major with the city workers not having a contract that's going to meet the standards of

living for the current date, 2013.

So thank you.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Thank you.

Ken, excuse me one second. Can I ask you one question?

I know you received, I guess, the Right to Know request from OPA. You received all the information you requested -- well, you didn't go through it yet, but most of the information.

Any of that information that you looked through or breezed through quickly, did that include the actual formulas for the assessments that were done throughout the City?

REVEREND METZNER: I honestly have not been able to go through that material. I received it today at 4:30.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Okay. If you do get that, if you would like to forward that to us, I think that

would be great. I think everyone here on council would like to see that.

REVEREND METZNER: I would be happy to do that, but, of course, the OPA provided it in hardcopy, presumably, to make it as difficult as possible for me to share that. But I'm sure I can find a photocopier somewhere.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Well, if you want, you can come to my office. We have staff willing to help you out and make copies. And I think it will be very important.

REVEREND METZNER: Okay.

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Because all the information that you guys have requested, and council -- and I know Councilman Johnson has requested information as far as that also, and I'm not sure if he has received that as of this time.

So we appreciate the effort that you have put into this, the

Crosstown Coalition and the residents, in general, to actually go and put the pressure on. Because, as council, we are doing it through our abilities. But when the residents get involved and people ask for Right to Know request and try to get the information necessary so that they can make a sound judgment on whether this is a fair and accurate system that's being put in place, that really goes a long way. And that helps us make the decision and also helps the media decide on what they think is right and fair.

And it just adds pressure, because we, as a city, want to get it right. I think as a whole, most people believe that, you know, if you want to have a fair tax system, you can't put garbage into a system and expect to get flowers out of it.

And right now that's what it seems like they're trying to do. So if you can and if you're willing to,

our office -- anytime you want to come up there, and if we can help you make copies of it or if you have information that you think would really help us, I'd be more than happy to sit down and go over that information.

REVEREND METZNER: Thank you. I'd be happy to.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Real quick, I want to say a couple things that might get me into trouble.

Real quick, and then we'll have the next three individuals we're going to call.

With respect to the municipal workers, it makes no sense. You know, we have found ourselves in a position where the challenges associated with the administration and the municipal workers' inability to get a deal done has spilled over into the City Council of Philadelphia with the recent budget address, and that's not going to happen again.

But it has put us in a position where, personally, I feel like getting engaged, and I am engaged. I'm having conversations with people. We are going to shortly be making available a pension proposal that I think makes some sense. It's not the pension proposal that the administration has proposed, but it's not the current pension proposal.

And I think if there could be some level of consensus with that, then I think it takes that issue off the table.

With respect to the healthcare and the contributions, I think they're reasonably close on that.

The raises, nobody can ever get a raise big enough. But at the end of the day, there are, in fact, raises put on the table. And for the first time in the last several years since this impasse has happened, the administration has actually

acknowledged that there's money in the budget for raises. So I don't know about the amount, if it's fair in terms of the municipal workers, but there is a full acknowledgment by the administration that there's money to give raises.

The last issue is furloughs. And based on our questions to the administration, the furloughs have nothing to do with the financial condition of the City. So a layperson will say, well, if that's the sticking point, and it has nothing to do with the financial aspects of our budgeting process over the next two or three years, then why is that on the table.

So that's what it comes down to. And I think very shortly that's going to be front and center with the ability to get a solution so we can move ahead, because we've spent far too much time on this particular issue, and it's not allowing us to

reach our full level of production, both as workers and as the government, to move forward.

With respect to what council can do, council is not involved in negotiations. Negotiations with workers are always between management and workers, which is the administration and the workers. But we're going to figure out a way to try and move the ball along. So we do care.

I was a traditional city worker before I was a councilperson, as a number of us up here were. So we care about it and, hopefully, we'll get that done.

With respect to the issues and the whole notion around OPA not providing the appropriate information -- and this is where I'm going to get in trouble -- I supported a bill some years ago, and it was primarily at the request of citizens

and the newspaper saying we have to fix the broken system. And we had a series of bills, all these folks at the former BRT, whatever, they were giving the hookup to their friends. And everybody said, we have to fix the system.

And the bill got introduced in City Council that said, you know, we're getting rid of the BRT and we're going to put everything in the administration's hands. Right? Remember that, on the charter? And all the citizens came out and overwhelmingly supported us putting all of this process in the administration's hands.

Hello.

And we did that. Now the BRT said, wait a minute, you can't do that. The BRT got engaged in the system with respect to the courts. And the courts have ruled at this point that we didn't have the jurisdiction to do that. So now the OPA does have the

ability to do what it does. And we all asked for that.

But in retrospect, I made a mistake on voting for that. I'm saying it here first. And I know my friend over here, Mr. Graham, is going to put that front and center in tomorrow's Inquirer. But I'm saying it.

I've had too many conversations. I know we've had far too many discussions in our neighborhoods and talking about some of the challenges and the fact that we're not able to get in a timely way, one, the numbers, which we were supposed to get last year, and here we are just getting the numbers, and now we're talking about the accuracy of the numbers. And so that's a problem. And so what's done is done. We have to figure out a way to come up with solutions. But we hear you. We're going to be grilling the OPA and we're going to get to the bottom of this and

do the best that we can do to make this reasonably fair and accurate.

All right? I just wanted to say that to you all.

Councilman Jones?

COUNCILMAN JONES: Just by way of the comments about the negotiations on the municipal contract, one of the things that we -- sometimes in this position I've learned that we're damned if we do and even damned more if we don't. If we get involved directly in the municipal negotiations, you know, it's us meddling outside of our bailiwick.

And so what we try to do is work within the framework of things that we have jurisdiction over. And I would say to you that these aren't just taxpayers. These aren't just voters. For the most part, everybody at this table, these are our neighbors, people we see every day to make our city run that we care deeply about.

And for the freshmen that are here, it's only been two years that they've had to deal with this, but we're closing in on six years that some of the veterans have had to deal with.

But understand this: Every budget that we ever passed we did in conjunction with labor. We've raised issues of real estate taxes, sales taxes. We even tried to tax soda. And if air were to stand still long enough, we would've taxed that just to make sure that government ran. But it was always in conjunction with and in conversation with labor.

So it's not a vote that we didn't ever give up that they said, okay, we'll come back next year and try to work this out, that we didn't approve at the end of that day.

So I want you to know that, I can speak for most people -- all, I feel safe in saying that. Everybody up here wants a fair labor contract as

soon as possible. Our house got violated during the budget address. So we too are vested in this. We want our trash picked up on time and the police to respond when we call 911 as well.

So we're not over here or over there. We're in this together. And I just want you to know that. And that even though we don't openly do or say a lot of things, behind the scenes, this administration and this council is very much trying to move forward for a fair and just labor contract. Just so you know. All right?

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you all so much for your testimony. We probably talked longer than you guys did.

Ms. Lewis?

We don't have any more names on the witness list.

All right, ma'am. Please come forward.

COUNCILMAN HENON: Council

President, if I may?

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Yes, sir.

COUNCILMAN HENON: If I may, while the witnesses approach the stand, just to echo what some of my colleagues have been talking about.

Not just dealing with one issue, we have as a legislative body under the stewardship of our council president have been dealing with a lot of creative ways that we could take a look at this budget and be prudent and make sure that we have the most efficient services that we can provide to the City of Philadelphia and with no additional expense.

We have successfully, I guess, dissected the revenue department in its tax delinquency collections, making sure through two days, two full days of hearings, and taking a look at the efficiencies and deficiencies of our tax delinquent collection process.

So we collaborately, as a council with multiple departments, through this budget process have been calling each department on their collections, their processes, and revenue, being a part of every conversation.

We had the administration create a new tax czar, so to speak, somebody who is going to be overseeing our tax delinquency and its collections. Every council member has been asking about its tax delinquencies and how we're going to make it better and hold them accountable for their processes.

And also, you know, we have a new and welcomed revenue commissioner. And I think it's all a result of the due diligence of this body trying to make sure that we get the most return on our investments.

So we do have a lot of things going on, and we're not just a

single-issue body here. We're taking everything into consideration as we continue to go through this budget process.

Thank you all for coming out tonight.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you, Councilman.

MS. LEWIS: The next two speakers, Norman Van Dyke and Chester Skaziak.

MR. SKAZIAK: My name is Chester Skaziak. I didn't prepare anything tonight. I'm a Philadelphia resident, and I came here to meet the Crosstown Coalition. But a few things were mentioned today: CDCs and the requesting $5 million for the operations. I support CDCs. However, I traced some, and as Mr. Henon said, some of them are tax delinquent. I have one that backed out of a deal last year for a million dollars. What we did was we allowed them to buy out

paying for 40 percent of what they owed us. I don't understand that.

And the other issue I would like to bring up is, I sent you an e-mail, and there was a property that was just bought on November 21st, 2012 for $1.5 million. And the land assessment is $505,000 on 43,000 square feet. For one acre it was half a million dollars.

And one block over, less than a quarter of a mile away, a property was valued as $104,000 with 10,000 more square feet.

I don't understand that.

When I called the radio station -- or they called me, and I participated -- I told them I had 4,000 square feet. And Mr. McKeithen said the reason my property is valued at $90,000, or 22,000 square feet, is because of usage. I suspect the fact that I don't have a swimming pool, my property is worth more money.

The responsible party for setting the taxes or overseeing the values of properties and the new tax AVI, actual value initiative, is getting an $1,800 reduction in their taxes.

That's all I have to say. And thank you for allowing me to do this.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you, sir.

MS. VAN DYKE: My name is Norma Van Dyke. My testimony concerns the AVI and the issue of the tax rate and the possible exemptions that might be granted.

I've lived in my home in Society Hill since 1975, so I would qualify for a homestead exemption and probably any old-age exemptions that might be included in this package.

But, nevertheless, I advocate for holding the assessment rate at 1 percent without any

exemptions. Granting exemptions for homesteaders and others raises the tax considerably for those without exemptions and reduces it negligibly for those who would get an exemption.

I've done some math, and I'm not good in math, so if my math is wrong, shout right out and maybe you'll disqualify what I'm about to say.

At 1 percent a property assessed at $300,000, the assessment would be $3,000. But it goes to $3,690 at 1.32 percent.

The assessment for those who qualify for homestead deduction of $30,000 would see their appraisal reduced to $270,000, and their assessment at $2,700 at 1 percent. But raised to $2,814 at 1.32 percent.

Under the homestead exemption, the property owner has saved $86, but those who do not qualified for the exemption would have their bill raised by $960.

Would $86 make the difference between keeping or losing a property? I think it's much more likely $960 would make a bigger difference.

Another idea being floated is to phase in the increased taxes. This might be a benefit to young professionals whose incomes are on the rise, but it is unlikely to benefit anyone who is retired or whose income is not likely to rise significantly.

The goal in granting homestead or other exemptions is to enable people to stay in their properties.

Another option to achieve this goal might be to have the City pick up any portion of the assessment that the property owner feels unable to pay per year.

The City would charge interest on the loan each year, but when the property is sold, both the

City and the property owner would claim their portion of the equity that they've invested.

I think that this system would be fair to both the City and the property owner.

Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you, ma'am. Thank you so much.

With respect to the 1 percent rate, there are a couple of ways you can get there. And it's been referenced that a lot of municipalities across the country have 1 percent rates, and that's factual. But a lot of municipalities across the state also have the ability to have flexible rates, meaning that the rate for commercial can be different than the rate for residential.

The challenge with City of Philadelphia, we don't have that flexibility. So whatever our rate is for residential, it's the same for

commercial.

As an example, in Boston, I believe it is, where there's a 1 percent residential, but the commercial rate is 1.8. So the revenues are generated on the commercial side and not on the residential side. That's the challenge that we have.

The only other way you can get to a 1.0 -- and I'm estimating, and I think you probably have to cut close to $175 million or $200 million out of the City's budget to get to a 1.0 rate.

So there are ways to do that. One, we do have the ability to do it, which is cut $200 million out of the City's budget. And the other way, we do not have the flexibility to do that, although we are currently asking Harrisburg to allow us to buy from rate to rate so that we can have the flexibility so that you can have different rates for residential and commercial.

MS. VAN DYKE: All right. Thank you.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: You're welcome, ma'am.

Any other individuals?

State your name for the record, please.

MS. CHAPMAN: Good evening everyone. My name is Rosemary Chapman, and while I'm not a statistician or mathematician, what concerns me is the whole manner in which this AVI system has come about.

I recognize the problems that the City is facing financially. But I almost feel, and I've expressed this to some of my councilpersons, that the cart has been put before the horse.

The City needs money. We're going to get it. I believe this is the third meeting I've attended. And at the meeting that was held in City Council with representatives from AVI, I left there knowing no more than

I did before I came.

There were no clearcut positions stated. Everything was -- you know, much of it seemed like some were up in the air. Then there would be someone to gesture to reach back and someone from the back of the room who was part of the organization within AVI to come up and address issues.

Some of these things that were addressed were not addressed sufficiently for me.

So my concern is, what's going to be done? Why can't we get a definitive explanation about how these things are derived? I may not have all the answers. In fact, I don't profess to. As I said, I'm not a mathematician or a statistician, but I'm also aware of an organization or a coalition of organizations that has tried to come together with some answers. And I just think the taxpayers here deserve to know more definitively where we go from

here and how to resolve it.

I have no difficulty in paying my fair share, but I have every right to know how I'm being assessed.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Yes, ma'am. Thank you.

I want to thank you very much, Councilman. Do you want to do a closing remark?

COUNCILMAN SQUILLA: Yes. I do want to thank all the residents that came out today from the different areas. Unfortunately, there was an issue with traffic. So I'm sure it didn't help some people out.

We know a lot of the issues that you brought up. We've been fighting -- not fighting, but going through and trying to come up with ways to come up with solutions. We've been hitting the same wall that you guys have been hitting as far as trying to get information.

Council has been diligent,

and I've got to say, even last year when we decided to delay it a year, was very, very good -- it wasn't everybody's first idea or first direction to go in, but we ended up getting there together. And I believe and I have faith in council to come up with some solutions this year to make this happen that hopefully can be as fair as possible for most.

You know, we have doubts. You know, we have doubts as council members just like you have doubts as residents of where this information came from and how they were able to come up with these assessments. And we're going to keep working on this for another month or longer to come up with a way to get a solution.

We appreciate all your help. We appreciate all of your questions. We appreciate you going after OPA and trying to fight to get answers. That helps us.

We can't do a lot of this without your aggressiveness and moving forward and trying to get people to get engaged in this process. It really helps. It helps us tremendously. And you don't realize what a big help you have been to us as council.

So I want to thank you for coming out here today. I want to thank you for coming out to a lot of council meetings. And I know a lot of times it sounds like a broken record when everybody is saying it over and over again, but it's the feeling that people feel like they're being abused, and we want to try to stop that from happening.

We're listening to all of your ideas. We're willing to work with you and come up with solutions. And we want to thank you for your input and time in representing your community and your household and how important that is and what that means to us. So thank

you for being here.

I do want to thank Council President Clarke and the staff for being here today, along with the Sheet Metal Workers Union and Gary and Joe and the guys that let us use this hall.

Unfortunately, there wasn't as many people as I expected. But hopefully moving forward they will still be engaged in the process and get us more help that we can use in order to make this AVI a feasible and a bearing and fair and accurate way to tax people.

So thank you for your time, and I really appreciate you coming down tonight. Good night.

COUNCIL PRESIDENT CLARKE: Thank you all very much for your participation this evening.

This concludes the neighborhood budget hearing for this evening. The Committee will stand in recess until Monday, April 22nd, 2013,

10:00, at which time we will reconvene in the City Council Chambers, Room 400, City Hall.

Thank you, again, very much.

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(Proceedings were concluded at 8:37 p.m.)

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