

Editorial in the Venice Gondolier Sun on 8.5.17

Fire assessment should surprise no one

As the date approaches for a decision on whether to impose a fire service assessment on property owners, Venice City Council members are starting to hear from their constituents.

So far, they're getting nothing but complaints, even from people who say they support the assessment in concept.

Objections range from the semantic — “Call it what it is: a tax” — to the financial — “My payment to the city is more than doubling. How are people on fixed incomes supposed to handle this?”

Those are legitimate points. Because the assessment isn't considered a property tax, it's probably not going to be deductible on your income tax return.

And even with a planned reduction in the city's millage rate, most tax bills are likely to be higher due to increased property values, debt service on the two bonds voters approved last year and, of course, the fire assessment, if it's adopted.

The trigger for the complaints was a notice the city sent out regarding an Aug. 21 public hearing on the assessment, the last step before a vote. If approved, the assessment will be on the tax bills that go out later this year.

The notice includes the specific assessment amount for the owner's property. Until now, the city had been using a generic house valued at \$190,000 to give an example of the fee, but many owners are seeing higher amounts, and commercial property assessments can be much more. A statement in the notice that the assessment could double in the future “without further notice” adds to the anxiety.

So does the belief among some people that the Council is trying to sneak the assessment past the public by bringing it up as late as possible, when many property owners are still gone for the summer.

That's just not true, and raising that spurious “fact” could skew the debate, besides being unfair to the Council.

The assessment has been under discussion for more than a year, going back to when the Council made its final decision to abandon merger talks with Sarasota County (which also charges a fire assessment, by the way).

Two months later — in June of last year — it voted to hire a consultant to do a study of all that would be involved in imposing an assessment for Fiscal Year 2017-18.

We wrote a story before that meeting saying that hiring a consultant was on the agenda, and one about the meeting saying a motion to that effect had been approved.

Since then, the Council has discussed the assessment or taken some action regarding it at regular meetings, special meetings and workshops, most of which we've previewed and all of which we've reported on — a total of 18 stories.

And the public has had a chance to participate at each meeting. *Almost no one has.*

We can't tell you why few people spoke out about the proposed fire assessment before. We can, however, tell you that it wasn't for lack of opportunity, and that people who say they were unaware it was in the works just weren't paying attention.

In our opinion, it's equally wrong to say the Council is taking advantage of the fact many property owners haven't returned to Venice yet.

At least a half dozen of the meetings at which the assessment was discussed occurred during the most recent season. The property-specific amounts hadn't been determined then, but it was pretty clear that the sentiment on the Council was in favor of adopting an assessment.

In addition, the notice has gone out to all property owners — not tenants — in the city. It should get to most of them, even if they're out of town, providing the vast majority a chance to weigh in, whether by email; by formal written objections (within 20 days of the date of the notice); by showing up at the hearing; or all three.

And in reaction to the comments that are already coming in, city staff is in the process of arranging two public forums for Wednesday, Aug. 16, "to serve as an informational exchange for those individuals who would like more information or need their questions answered," City Clerk Lori Stelzer wrote to the Council members Thursday.

That probably won't satisfy everyone, but the city seems to be doing everything required by law, and more.

People who have a problem with the assessment deserve to be heard, and we believe the Council members will take their input seriously — as they would have all along, had they heard any.

The silence on this issue hasn't been on their side.