

Dear Board of Supervisors,

At the public comment portion of the Board of Supervisors meeting on April 4th, I spoke of my concern over the new 2022 tax assessments in Accomack County. To refresh your memory, I spoke of the specific discrepancy in my percentage increase as compared to my immediate neighbors; my assessment having risen 26% and my next door neighbors only 1%. Other homes within eyesight of our home had increases of between 1% and 5%. I also pointed out other homes in Onancock that experienced the same discrepancy as compared to homes within eyesight but outside the town line.

I felt somewhat optimistic I had been heard when, toward the conclusion of the meeting, the Board agreed to call the head of the Assessor's office, Mr. Brent Hurdle, to a meeting on April 6th. Mr. Hurdle, in essence, explained how his office does the assessments with lots of jargon about comparable and medians, but he failed to answer the basic question, "Why is my percentage increase 26 times that of my next door neighbor?" All he could do was suggest that homeowners use the appeal process if they felt their assessments were out of line.

I did file an appeal and received the following notification from Jenny Nicholson in the assessor's office: "In reviewing your appeal, I do not see a basis for any change, particularly considering the sales price from 2014." Does she see a basis for change for my neighbors small increases? The sales price from 2014 should bear no influence as the assessment has risen three times since 2014 and the sales price should have been factored in during those assessments.

I will now appeal to the Board of Equalization but have little confidence in a better result. Regardless of the result in my personal case I believe there are ample reasons to suspect that the assessment of real estate in Accomack County is wrought with flaws and inconsistencies that merit investigation.

It took very little effort to find situations in support of this position.

In the process of researching my particular situation using the AccoMap system my curiosity led me to look at the experience of some of my friends and neighbors in Onancock, and also in some other areas of the county. Take 1 Market Street in Onancock. This historic home, perched high above the marina with stunning views, but no waterfront access was raised 24.8%. Contrast this with homes along Hermitage Drive, directly across the north branch of Onancock Creek from 1 Market Street. These homes have extensive waterfront with deep water docks - deep enough to moor significantly sized boats. Their assessments rose a meager 2-3%. Other homes on the village side of the creek experienced double digit increases with one home, 23 King Street, seeing a 40.8% increase.

60 Hill Street is also interesting. The assessment on this property increased 31.8%. The assessment on 61 Hill Street, directly opposite, rose 3%.

Down Onancock Creek, on Swan Lane, increases were in the range of .9 to 2.4%, except for 24390 Swan Lane which saw an increase of 22%. These are all comparable properties with waterfront on the creek, and include Meadville, a beautiful historic property perched high above the creek with magnificent views (.9% increase). It is also noteworthy that 24200 Swan Lane sold last December for \$1,065,000 but its assessment rose a meager 2.4% to \$539,300. Conversely 24390 Swan Lane sold for \$940,000 in 2020 but the assessment went up 22% to \$751,700.

Another example of an out of kilter assessment is 35371 Copes Drive, Belle Haven. This home has frontage on the Bay and is on the market for \$1,295,000. It's assessment went up .46% to \$571,800 - less than half of the asking price of the property.

Among the historic homes along Back Street, Front Street, and Cross Street in Accomack assessment went up as much as 15% and as little as -2.5% (yes, that's a minus sign).

I checked out a few other friends down at Nandua Shores (Argento Drive) and surrounding the Country Club (Blenheim and Harbor Roads) and none of these friends saw an increase of more than 3%.

It has been said that a "rising tide floats all boats." Clearly this is not the case for tax assessments in Accomack County. Clearly the boats are floating much higher in the Town of Onancock, the Town of Chincoteague, and at Captain's Cove.

What's the point of all of this?

I can't say that the assessment methodology as used currently is broken; it probably works just the way it is designed. I can say with certainty that the methodology used for assessing properties in Accomack County is deeply flawed and does not accurately reflect the reality of real estate here. The system appears to use a statistical approach whereby the county is chopped up into assessment areas and assessments are adjusted by applying real estate trends within a given area to that particular area, not to the county as a whole. Rural areas have far fewer data points to work with, resulting in these areas being skewed low for lack of data. The lines are so distinct that a house on one side is raised 26% in contrast to a neighboring house on the other side of the line that is raised only 1%.

The three areas of the county with a high density of available housing will be the three areas that see the majority of home sales and consequently will have the majority of "comparables" from which to make assessment decisions. Consequently these three areas were hit with double digit increases with increases of over 40% not unheard of.

In the more rural, sparsely populated areas there is little real estate activity simply because there are many fewer homes. What is unique in these rural areas is the presence of highly desirable real estate located along the creeks and waterfront that command top dollar when sold but are located in areas of low activity and get passed over during reassessment for lack of comparables.

Town lines are political boundaries created to define the limits of a political jurisdiction. There is nothing physically different on one side of the line or the other — the air is no cleaner, the grass is no greener — but these lines have been used as hard, physical distinctions between Onancock, Captains Cove, or Chincoteague and rural Accomack for the purpose of assessment.

My research into assessments has been limited to a cursory sample of homes through the AccoMap system of people in areas I have visited and have personal knowledge of. In not one case did I find consistency. A deep data dive into the overall assessment database would doubtless be necessary to uncover all of the idiosyncrasies and inequities that currently exist.

What to do about it?

As a taxpayer it deeply offends me to see my taxes increase disproportionately to my next door neighbors — my bill went up over \$650 this year and theirs stayed essentially flat. I do not resent paying taxes and appreciate the services we are paying for. In fact, I have chosen to live

in the Town of Onancock with its additional tax burden because I appreciate the benefits these additional taxes provide. I do resent, however, being targeted by a flawed system to pay more than my fair share thus subsidizing other homeowners. I know I am not alone.

I believe the following actions on the part of the County of Accomack are warranted:

1. Conduct an extensive analysis of real estate assessment data to uncover inequities and idiosyncrasies that currently exist across the county. A good data analyst given access to the full assessment data should be able to identify cases of inconsistent treatment of properties such as under-assessment or disparities in neighborhoods.
2. Research alternate methodologies employed by other jurisdictions with similar rural dynamics that better reflect the situation on the ground here in Accomack. A system that is appropriate for Virginia Beach or Richmond simply does not fit rural counties. I have heard anecdotal stories from Northhampton County residents that a similar dynamic is present between Cape Charles/Bay Creek and the remainder of the county.
3. Present the findings of these investigations at a public forum and solicit comment from taxpayers.

Thank you for taking the time to read this extensive missive and to consider the voice of one of many taxpayers concerned about the equity of our assessment system.

Sincerely,

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Cc: Jan Proctor, County Attorney
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