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Stakes are high on 'dark store' taxes

Retailers defend lower property values, but city leaders say tax breaks are costly

By Dennis Hines

dhines@lakegenevanews.net

The city of Lake Geneva has lost nearly \$7 million in taxable property value in recent years at large retail stores that have enjoyed significant savings in the era of "dark store" property taxation in Wisconsin.

The issue, which voters in Walworth County will consider Nov. 6 in a referendum urging state action, has depleted the city's tax base at the benefit of some of the best known retailers in town.

Store owners and others in the business commu-

nity defend the "dark store" method of tax savings, or in some cases deny that they have utilized that approach to reduce their tax bills by lowering the taxable value of their properties.

County property tax records from the past five years reflect the issue — and count the city's losses by the millions.

■ Walmart's property tax assessment on its Lake Geneva store has dropped from about \$12.6 million to \$11.3 million last year, and dropped again to \$10.6 million this year.

■ Target's property tax assessment has declined from



Target property value down: \$1.5 million

\$8.5 million to \$7 million.

■ Home Depot's property tax assessment had dropped from \$8.6 million to \$7.2 million.

■ Best Buy's assessment has declined \$2 million,



Home Depot property value down: \$1.4 million

from about \$6 million to \$4 million on its local store.

These are some examples cited by local government officials of a phenomenon permitted by state law for commercial prop-

erty owners to appeal their assessments based on the argument that taxes should be no different for a store that is busy and profitable as taxes are for a store that is vacant, or "dark."

While retailers argue that they are correcting years of over-taxation, local governments contend that big-box stores and other businesses are getting unfair tax breaks that are forcing higher taxes on homeowners and others in a community.

With the Nov. 6 referendum on whether voters support state reforms, Walworth County is joining

a statewide effort to urge state lawmakers to deal with the dark store issue.

Lake Geneva Mayor Tom Hartz said he believes the state eventually will develop a resolution that will satisfy both the retail store owners and the local governments.

"I believe there will be a compromise between the two," Hartz said.

The League of Wisconsin Municipalities, which represents local governments statewide, is campaigning for voter approval of Nov. 6 referendums in Walworth County and

PLEASE SEE STORE ON 8A



Children and adults enjoy an outdoor ice skating rink in this photo from NiceRink, the firm providing a rink facility for downtown Lake Geneva this winter. (Contributed photo/Regional News)

Downtown getting cooler with ice rink

By Dennis Hines

dhines@lakegenevanews.net

Another icy attraction is in the works to give outdoor enthusiasts a reason to visit downtown Lake Geneva this winter.

City officials have agreed to allow an ice skating rink at Flat Iron Park open to the public for free, possibly as soon as later this month.

The Lake Geneva Business Improvement District has offered to pay the estimated \$10,000 cost of purchasing and maintaining

the rink, which will be 80 feet long and 40 feet wide.

Kevin Fleming, a member of the business group's board, said he and his children used to go ice skating on Geneva Lake, and they look forward to trying out the new rink.

"I think an ice skating rink is long overdue," Fleming said. "I think it will be a great addition."

Organizers hope that the city will assume responsibility for reopening the ice rink in future years.

Ed Svitak, president

of the VISIT Lake Geneva tourism group, said he is excited about having an ice skating rink available as a new attraction to bring people to the community during the winter months.

"It will be something good for residents and visitors alike," Svitak said. "It can't do anything but good."

The business improvement district intends to install and open the ice rink, weather permitting, by late November and to keep it operational until late February.

Bridget Leech, the district's executive director, said the rink will be a nice addition to go along with the community's Winterfest events as well as the interactive ice castle structure that is planned at Riviera Beach.

"It will be a whole day of activities for people," Leech said.

Downtown visitors can either bring use their own ice skates, or Clear Water Outdoors is considering offering skate rentals for people who use the rink.

PLEASE SEE RINK ON 8A

New invasive plant found in lake lagoon

Environmentalists aim to prevent spread

By Travis Northern

tnorthern@lakegenevanews.net

WILLIAMS BAY — Searchers have confirmed a new invasive plant species has taken root in Geneva Lake, although the infestation appears to be isolated to one lagoon away from the main lake area.

The algae known as "starry stonewort" appears to have settled only where it was first discovered this summer — in a lagoon near the town of Linn neighborhood known as Trinke Estates.

A survey of the lake conducted Oct. 3 and Oct. 17 by the Geneva Lake Environmental Agency and the state Department of Natural Resources did not identify starry stonewort anywhere within the main lake.

But officials caution that the unwanted plant could still spread from the lagoon.

The invasive algae grows into thick bushes that can take over breeding areas for fish, overcome native vegetation and disrupt a lake's recreational activities.

Ted Peters, director of the Williams Bay-based environmental agency, presented the findings at an



The invasive algae known as starry stonewort takes root in sediment, making it difficult to eradicate. (Contributed photo/Regional News)

Oct. 23 meeting of his agency's board at George Williams College.

Peters expressed relief that searchers found no evidence that the invasive plant has reached other areas of Geneva Lake.

"It's not as bad as it could have been," he said. "If we had found this at some of the other sites, it would've just been a nightmare."

Amy Kretlow, aquatic invasive species specialist for the state DNR, said the

PLEASE SEE PLANT ON 8A



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