

## Municipal Taxes Up 36% i 3 Years - "Just Right"?



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#### **Property taxes and the township's spending history**

Author: Sarah N. Lynch

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Taxes heart of debate in Montville

#### **Republicans say they need to come down**

#### **Democrats blame state**

By Sarah N. Lynch

Daily Record

MONTVILLE -- George Lei's question summed up what the township committee race is about: taxes.

"How much do you guys pay?" the senior citizen asked the two Democrats and two Republicans who are running for election during a town meeting-style debate on Thursday night.

"Are you feeling that the taxes you pay are low or high or just right?"

The answers reflected their positions on tax reform in the township.

**Democrats Mike O'Brien and Daniel Grant, who is running for re-election, said**

**their taxes are "just right."**

Republicans James "Jim" Sandham and Deborah Nielson said they felt that their taxes are too high.

Property taxes and the township's spending history were at the heart of the debate, which was sponsored by the Montville Chinese Association in the public library's Pio Costa Auditorium.

Grant and O'Brien argued that the heart of the property tax issue lies with the state and how school taxes are collected, Republicans Nielson and Sandham reiterated their position that municipal tax dollars over the past years have not been wisely spent. Nielson pointed out that Montville has grown tremendously since she moved in 15 years ago. To accommodate that growth, the township saw a flurry of projects, including the library, the public safety building that houses the police department and the teen center. But now, it's come time "to pay the tab," she said, and many of those projects came in "over budget."

"For me, the most pressing issue is to control our taxes and balance spending," she said, while her running mate kept reiterating **the fact that the municipal budget went up by about 18 percent last year.**

Grant and O'Brien countered that the problems with property taxes stem mostly from Trenton.

"I believe the biggest issue facing us as taxpayers is a revision of the tax system," O'Brien said.

"Mayors and councils in the county should be uniting and fighting and going to Trenton to revise the whole system."

Grant pointed out that of the total amount of taxes, only 19 percent goes to the municipality and 2 percent of that goes to open space.

He also defended many of the projects that were put in place because they were needed to accommodate the 7,000 people who moved in over time.

Sandham and Nielson countered that while they are not promising to cut taxes, they are pledging to "stabilize" them.

"What that means is that the taxes go up in line with what you can afford as a homeowner in town," Sandham said in his opening remarks. "That is 2 percent, 3 percent, 4 percent -- **not 18 percent.**"

Nielson threw out several ideas:

Outsourcing some services.

Hiring seasonal services to cut lawns.

Refinancing a portion of the debt.

Leveling fines more efficiently, particularly in the areas of zoning and health violations.

Charging more or higher fees.

But while taxes were by far the most pressing issue of the evening, that did not mean that candidates did not use the opportunity to throw jabs.

At one point O'Brien and Sandham began swapping remarks to the point where the moderator had to step in and ask them not to address one another directly.

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