

Property Assessments and Taxes

The Association has been concerned with property assessments and taxes since its beginnings. Before Home Rule, officers of the association testified before the Senate and House Committees on the District of Columbia as well as before the District Commissioners concerning real property tax rates and inequitable assessments. When Public Law 93-407, the Home Rule Act, was passed in 1974, the D.C. Council was delegated responsibility in Title IV—Real Property Tax—to set the tax rate. The law also required assessments to be made annually at 100 percent of market value. Since 1974 the association has testified annually at hearings on property assessments and taxes held by the D.C. Council’s Committee on Finance and Revenue. Members have also met with the mayor and with the staff of the D.C. Department of Finance and revenue.

In 1973 assessments were changed from 55 percent of market value for residential property and 60 percent for commercial property to 100 percent for both. Since only half the properties were assessed in any one year, the change to 100 percent of market value created inequities depending on the year of assessment. Assessments in Chevy Chase increased from 30 to 50 percent for the tax year 1974. William K. Norwood chaired an Ad Hoc Committee on Real Property Assessments. This committee developed a questionnaire, which was sent to the D.C. Assessor. A team of experts from the Assessor’s office appeared at a meeting of the Association on February 20, 1973, to speak and answer questions. Many questions were not answered to the satisfaction of the members, who passed a resolution protesting the assessment procedure, demanding that assessments be no more than 10 percent above those for tax year 1973 and during a 50-25 percent rebate on property taxes for elderly homeowners, depending on their income.

Gilbert Hahn (an appointed D.C. Council member) filed suit on the basis of the real property assessment process, which because a class action suit on behalf of one group of property owners. The association joined the suit, and the Assessor’s reply to the association’s questionnaire was used by Hahn to prepare his case. A court ruling found the assessment practices discriminatory and substituted a procedure to implement the law requiring assessments at 100 percent of market value. The District had to reimburse the taxpayers in the group bringing suit for taxes paid on illegal increases in assessments. The suit resolved inequities between groups, but did not resolve inequities within the group.

The market value of real property continued to increase rapidly throughout the 1970s. Assessments and property taxes followed these increases with a lag of two to three years. The next big increase in assessments came in 1975 (for tax year 1976); the increase

being about 27 percent in Chevy Chase. At an association meeting on April 7, 1975, a resolution was passed requesting the Council and Mayor to (1) establish equitable and explicit criteria for real property assessments, (2) defer the increased assessments for tax year 1976, (3) limit revenue from property taxes to 15 percent of the D.C. budget, and (4) reverse the trend of increasing the number of tax-exempt properties. A study of assessments in Chevy Chase by Dorothy Knecht and Robert Stiehler revealed differences of several thousand dollars for similar houses built by the same builder at the same time. Little progress in obtaining relief from property taxes was obtained until the following year, when homeowners were given a "homestead" exemption of \$6,000 in property assessment, later increased to \$9,000. Low-income residents were also given a tax credit up to \$400 (commonly known as a "circuit breaker," depending on their income.

Nothing was done to eliminate inequities in assessments. On August 25, 1979, Donald Lief and Robert Stiehler of the Association met with representatives from Advisory Neighborhood Commission 3B, Common Cause, and the East of the River Neighborhood Investment Association to discuss inequitable assessments throughout the District. The Citizens for Fair Assessment originated at this meeting; Robert Stiehler has been chairman of the research committee since 1979. Statistical studies were made comparing assessments and selling prices of properties (A/S ratios) in the District. Reports were published in 1980, 1981, 1982, and 1983. As a result of these studies, large variations in A/S ratios among 57 assessment neighborhoods were drastically reduced, but large variations within neighborhoods still persisted.

Public Safety

Fire

Fire was the most serious threat to public safety in the early years, when wood stoves and fireplaces were extensively used for cooking and heating, and candles and oil lamps were used for light. During its first year, 1909, the association succeeded in having five fire hydrants installed and purchased two fire ladders for community use. The establishment of a firehouse received high priority in the second year. The fire threat became less serious when central heating was installed in homes, electric lights replaced oil lamps, and fire-resistant materials were used more extensively. Nevertheless, fire remained a threat to public safety. When the voluntary firefighters of earlier years were superseded by the D.C. Fire Department, the Association supported both adequate

facilities and personnel. The firehouse on Connecticut Avenue between Everett and Fessenden Streets served our community for many years. Fires have been extinguished in most instances before extensive damage has occurred, but smoke inhalation remains a serious problem.

Emergency Services

Public emergency medical service in the area began in 1938, when the Chevy Chase Rescue Squad was organized and located at Military Road and 38th Street. This voluntary group expanded later to become the Bethesda–Chevy Chase Rescue Squad. It disbanded during World War II. After the war the squad was reestablished and located in Bethesda, but it continued to provide service in Chevy Chase, D.C. The squad was supported by voluntary contributions from residents in the area served.

The D.C. Fire Department was later given the responsibility of providing emergency medical service in the District and as of 2011 had 25 basic life support units, 14 advanced life support or medic units, and 20 paramedic units. As of 2011, about 85 percent of the Fire and Emergency Medical Services workload was responding to calls for medical emergencies. The ambulance serving Chevy Chase is located at Tenley Circle. The nearest medical unit is located at Station 31, Connecticut Ave. and Fessenden St., N.W. A division of opinion in the Chevy Chase, D.C., area between use of the Bethesda–Chevy Chase Rescue Squad and the D.C. Fire and Emergency Medical Services agency escalated starting in the 1980s. Many residents of Chevy Chase, D.C., expressed a preference for service by the Bethesda–Chevy Chase Rescue Squad because of its more rapid response, ambulance service to a hospital of the patient's choice, and voluntary contributions for service, instead of a D.C. charge that runs between \$428 and \$508.

Crime Prevention

P.J. Ricker, the association's first president, reported that "early night prowlers" attempted entry at his and Mr. Murphy's home during the winter of 1907-1908 but were driven off. The first permanent police patrol was established in 1910 to control traffic during school hours. Crime was not a serious problem, and doors were not usually locked. Edward T. Stafford did not mention any other police problem in "Fifty Years in Chevy Chase," but the Association did have a public protection committee.

The decline in the association membership during the 1960s and 1970s coincided with the years of declining public safety in the area. A decrease in community and neighborhood cohesion could have affected public safety. For a period, the area north of Nebraska Avenue had about one burglary every day. The price of silver was at a premium, and a master burglar named Bernard Welch and his ilk created a feeling of acute insecurity. After Welch's arrest and conviction, a symbolic eclipse, burglaries began to decline. .

For many years Chevy Chase was included in the Eighth Police Precinct, with headquarters at Albemarle and 42nd Streets. The D.C. Police Department was reorganized between 1968 and 1970, changing from precincts to districts. At first Precinct 8, which included Chevy Chase, was divided between the Second and Fourth Police Districts. The association vigorously opposed this division and succeeded in having the entire area west of Rock Creek Park included in the Second Police District, with headquarters at Idaho Avenue and Macomb Street. With such a vast area to cover, Chevy Chase is not the Second Police District's most pressing concern. Nevertheless, the Association has been active in the Second Police District's Citizens Advisory Council. Five of its leaders have come from our area: William K. Norwood, Gary P. Jani, Karl F. Mautner, Samantha Nolan, and George Corey.

CCCA's 75th anniversary history cited improved work by the police force, intelligent planning, dedicated police officials and officers, and a conscious community-relations effort for helping control crime. A program concentrating on the arrest, conviction, and incarceration of career criminal or repeat offenders also got credit.

The association initiated and succeeded in obtaining action by the Metropolitan Council of Governments (COG) to establish unified public safety measures in the area. As a result, regional control of records and the sale of second-hand articles through pawnbrokers and transient dealers was established. This action has dampened the increase in burglaries of private homes and apartments in the area, at a time when the exorbitant market price of silver created a national crime wave.

Police credit much of the decline in crime to Neighborhood Watch programs that sprang up during the times of insecurity. The programs bring neighbors closer together—in fact, they often are the first opportunity people take to meet each other. They increase communication and confidence in one's neighbors and thus add to security. Thefts from parked vehicles remain a problem, and bicycles seem no safer from being stolen than they used to be. There is a continuing need to remain alert, be neighborly, and keep open lines of communication.

The association's current Neighborhood Watch program was started in 2000, when Mary Rowse headed the CCCA public safety committee. She organized 25 people to start the program, and began a Chevy Chase neighborhood listserv (Internet discussion group) as a way for people to stay connected. Rowse recruited Samantha Nolan to lead the effort after seeing her in a television interview about a robbery in the neighborhood. Nolan knocked on doors, and wrote to people she knew and watched for messages on the listserv from people she thought would make good block captains.

Nolan recruited 240 block captains over five years, and trained them during monthly one-hour training sessions at her home. Many captains moved, died, or gave up their posts, which meant training new block captains to take their place. Nolan trained more than 500 block captains, not only in Chevy Chase but also in the Cleveland Park, Woodley Park, Georgetown, AU/Tenley, and Dupont Circle areas of the Second District, and worked with all of the other police districts across the Districts to help spread Neighborhood Watch. (Nolan also has worked in the Chevy Chase, Rollingwood, and Bethesda areas of Montgomery County, Md.)

In recent years, the Association has devoted its public meeting in May to public safety issues.