

# EVERYDAY DEMOCRACY

Seasonal Newsletter from the Citizen Advocacy Center and Citizens in the Western Suburbs  
WINTER 2001

## HOT OVER HEATING BILLS?

The Citizen Advocacy Center and Pat Quinn held an open forum on March 8th to discuss the current energy crisis, how municipal utility taxes affect citizens, and how citizens can lobby local officials and candidates for local office to suspend, reduce or eliminate the utility tax. Few municipalities in DuPage County have taken affirmative steps to ease consumer hardship for citizens who have seen their heating bills rise to over three times their normal rate since February 2000. A typical consumer-heating bill last year was approximately \$72 per month. A municipality with a 4% utility tax and a population of 30,000 collected \$86,400.



The average current heating bill has skyrocketed to about \$232.00 per month and the same municipality will now collect about \$278,400, a financial windfall of \$192,000.

Municipalities who charge a utility tax are directly benefiting from the economic burden placed on consumers by corporate utilities that have gorged citizens.

Among the 32 municipalities in DuPage County, 24 charge a utility tax between 2% and 5%. Only four municipalities have responded to the citizenry's outcry for financial relief by passing ordinances to suspend or reduce the utility tax or give a tax credit. Bolingbrook, Glendale Heights, and Woodridge passed ordinances to suspend utility taxes for varying periods of time and Lombard passed an ordinance to lower the utility tax. Action by these four municipalities illustrates how local government leaders responded to the needs of their citizens.

## Citizen Training Corps

The next session of the Center's free civic education program, the Citizen Training Corps, begins March 7th, 2001. The program has received local and national

attention from news organizations, such as Nation's Cities Weekly, radio stations in Washington and Massachusetts and municipalities nationwide, that cited the Citizen Training Corps program as an example of how to effectively teach civic

activism. In addition, the Citizen Training Corps program was featured on US 99 radio station, which has the third largest listener population in the Chicagoland area, and in CityTalk, Chicagoland's Public Broadcasting Station newspaper.

### It is never too late to join!

**March 7:** Who Represents You?

**March 21:** Request Public Information

**April 4:** Basic Research Tools

**April 18:** Open Meeting Act

**May 2:** Government Budgets

**May 16:** Discuss all sides of an issue.

### Register Today!

Call the Center at (630) 833-4080 or email [tpastika@essential.org](mailto:tpastika@essential.org).

## a new public library for Elmhurst?

The Center's January Evening Program was a discussion of the proposed new Elmhurst public library. Elmhurst Library Board members and staff visited the Center to give a presentation on the proposed new library. On April 3rd, Elmhurst residents will vote on an advisory referendum asking the public to approve the sale of \$18.7 million in bonds.

Representatives from the library addressed questions such as how much will the library cost, when will the library be built, what will the new building offer and what will happen to the current building. The proposed library will be a two story, 80,000 square foot building with a partial basement. Library representatives stated that the storage facility of the new library would take 20 years to fill to maximum capacity. The new library will have increased computer facilities with 70 computer stations and a separate hands-on computer training program with 16 computer stations. Several different rooms will be available for the public: quiet study rooms, small group study rooms, public meeting rooms and a media preview room. The library will also have a large area for children with an expanded storytime room and an outdoor reading patio in a secure outdoor area. Other new amenities will include a drive-up window and express check-out stations for self check-out of materials. In order to enjoy nice days, the library will also have two outdoor terraces for library users to sit and read.

The total cost of the new library is \$24 million. \$18.7 million would be financed through the sale of bonds which Elmhurst taxpayers would repay over a 20 year period. The remaining \$1.3 million would be financed through grants, donations and library reserve funds. The library representatives stated that under the terms of an intergovernmental agreement between the Library, the City and the Park District, the current library building will be given to the Park District for public use.

To learn more visit the library or [www.elmhurstpubliclibrary.org](http://www.elmhurstpubliclibrary.org).

## Unanswered Questions?

C.U.R.E. (Citizens United for the Revitalization of Elmhurst) is a community group that advocates, "**NO, Not at this time**" on the April 3 referendum for a new public library because of many unresolved issues. The referendum is represented as a "package deal", already decided on by our City administration and which is now being "slam dunked" (Elmhurst Press 1-26-01) on our citizens without properly answering the myriad of questions surrounding this issue.

C.U.R.E. has developed an interactive website, [www.elmhurstlibraryref.com](http://www.elmhurstlibraryref.com). where citizens can receive referendum information and make comments. The proposed new library is a \$24 million project, however, the current Elmhurst Public Library in Wilder Mansion is currently ranked fourth in the nation for cities of a similar size (Chicago Tribune 10-24-00).

Issues which need to be addressed and which the City to date has not made firm commitments to are:

**TRAFFIC AND SAFETY** - The elimination of Margaret St. will push over 2,000 vehicles per day onto already burdened streets and the traffic impact of the 52 unit high density, 5-story condominium near the post office is currently unknown. Over 1500 schoolchildren and families visiting the area daily will be put at risk because of poorly planned traffic decisions made by our City administration, and the City's own traffic studies in 1988 and in 2000 say closing Margaret St. is not a good plan, yet the City disregards their own experts.

**HIGHER TAXES** - Citizens have not felt the "sticker shock" of the new high school and we are being asked to pay more taxes for a new library. What will be the real tax payer costs?

**WILDER MANSION** - The Park Board has no definitive plans for use of the Wilder Mansion if the referendum is approved. What is the impact to Wilder Park once the Wilder mansion is vacated?

**GREEN SPACE** - The City has not definitely responded to questions about the recent purchase of a \$1.4 million office building on Cottage Hill and Margaret St., nor has it committed on the future use of the building. The city quotes a timeline of 5 to 20 years before the office building may be razed for more green space.

**C.U.R.E believes "NO, Not at this time" is a wise choice until a sound plan is developed which will truly unite all Elmhurst citizens.**

C.U.R.E. Member

## EVENING PROGRAM

### **Will Increased Government Funding Improve Public**

The Metropolitan Planning Council will visit the Center March 20th at 7:30 PM to discuss research that suggests a significant increase in the guaranteed foundation level of dollars for public schools, provided by the Illinois government, would improve student performance in Illinois public schools.

Visit the Center to discuss topics such as: What should be the minimum level of per-pupil spending that the state should guarantee, regardless of a school district's local property tax resources? Should the State's share of public school funding be increased? What are funding options that would decrease reliance on local property taxes? How can local decisions on school funding be preserved? and What policies can be implemented to improve access and use of technology in all public schools?

**SAVE THE DATE! MARCH 20th at 7:30 PM**

### **BROWN BAG LUNCH: CAMPAIGN FINANCE REFORM**

The second Friday of every month, the Center sponsors an open forum on a vast range of issues. March 9th at 12:30 PM campaign finance reform will be discussed. The presidential election highlighted this issue once again and as promised, Senators McCain and Feingold have introduced their campaign finance reform bill. We will discuss both the McCain/ Feingold bill and Senator Hagel's campaign finance reform bill on March 9th.

**SAVE THE DATE! MARCH 9th AT 12:30 PM**

### **WELCOME NEW BOARD MEMBERS!**

**Keith Allen** - Mr. Allen was a CAC intern in 1995 and a summer Fellow in 2000. Keith is now with Altheimer and Gray.

**Milt Honel**- Mr. Honel has served as an adjunct faculty member at COD and Elmhurst College. He is a volunteer with several organizations and CAC.

**Dennis Hamm**- Mr. Hamm is an active member of Hispanics United, the DuPage Democratic Party, CAC and many bi-partisan causes.

**Steve DeLaRosa**- Mr. DeLaRosa has worked with the Nation Associates, the DuPage ACLU and organized Progressive Independents for Action. Steve is a founding member of the DuPage County Unity Coalition and has served on CAC's Suburban Civic Fair Committee since 1999.

## A "HOT" TOPIC

I am a full-time student at College of DuPage. For my Political Science class I had to do service learning for a community organization. I chose to volunteer for CAC and a "hot" topic fell into my lap.

As anyone who has opened up their latest gas bill can attest to, gas prices have skyrocketed. Nearly 3 million natural gas customers in Chicago, it's suburbs, and northern Illinois have seen their gas bills soar. Since last spring, gas prices have tripled.

Natural gas prices soared from 30.00 cents per therm to 97.73 cents per therm in February 2000. The average household burns eight therms a day. I believe the root causes of the natural gas price increase are complex. Some experts attribute price increases to factors such as an increased use of natural gas for electric generation, an unusually cold winter, reduced exploration and production of natural gas and low storage inventories.

The USA consumes more natural gas than we supply, I think because of reduced exploration and production of natural gas. In addition to heating 53% of American homes, natural gas is also used to generate 16% of the country's electricity – a percentage that is still growing.

High natural gas prices, which translate into high heating bills, have become a tremendous challenge for low-income individuals and seniors set on very fixed incomes. For those in need of financial assistance, call the local city/ village hall and ask for eligibility requirements for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). Another resource is the DuPage County Human Services (630-682-7000). People who are billed by People's Energy can visit [www.peoplesenergy.com](http://www.peoplesenergy.com) for information on financial assistance.

I believe that the recent natural gas price increase is an unfortunate accident and blame cannot land on one group. The oil-price crash in 1998 lead many national gas producers to scale back on drilling programs and three years of warm winters led the utility companies to have low storage inventories in their underground reservoirs. In addition, a number of environmental groups lobbied to restrict oil drilling.

It is time for the utility companies to prove why citizens pay big money for their services. I believe the companies will work hard to accommodate citizen's outcry for help. What else can they do with so much public scrutiny?

*College Of DuPage Volunteer  
Eric Gouty*

The views expressed by contributors to *Everyday Democracy* do not necessarily represent the views of the Center. The purpose of the guest contributors is to promote civic discourse and awareness of Center activities and events. The Center welcomes responses to editorials but due to newsletter space limitation, not all responses will be published.

*Everyday Democracy* is a publication of the *Citizen Advocacy Center*, a non-profit, nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) corporation. Submissions from citizen advocates in the western suburbs of Chicago are encouraged.

The *Center* is an educational and charitable organization dedicated to building democracy for the 21st century by strengthening the public's capacities, resources, and institutions for self-governance.

If you are interested in more information, becoming a volunteer, or making a tax-deductible contribution to the *Center*, please feel free to contact or visit us.

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### Making Your Mark at the Center

The Center participated in Elmhurst's "Great American TV Turn-Off Week", a city-wide event to provide evening activities for children. Remember when you were young and wanted to paint on all the walls in the house? The Center sponsored, "Make Your Mark", an opportunity for children to draw civic images on our wall.

An intern from the College of DuPage helped to organize the event and more than 30 people visited the Center to paint the wall. Our youngest artist was three and some parents helped to mix paint colors contribute to marking the wall. Here are some of our artists!

