

Tax overcharge discussion continues at meeting

By Chris Sykes Staff Writer, **Orange Transcript**

Tuesday night's City Council meeting was all about numbers as the discussion on the city's early tax overcharge continued.

Caitlin Gordon was the woman who single-handedly forced Jack Kelly, the city's chief financial officer, to admit that she and other taxpayers in Orange had been over billed \$2 million in property taxes during the first half of the 2010 fiscal year. Gordon accomplished that accounting feat by using her old tax bills to calculate what her true tax bill should have been and contrasted that with the erroneous amounts that had been charged to her.

During the meeting, Gordon went to the microphone to discuss the situation. She said she spoke with Councilman Rayfield Morton about receiving time beyond the limit for her questions, and said Morton offered his support to her request.

"At the last meeting, Council Vice President Elroy Corbitt thanked me for pointing out that the city had overtaxed myself and all its citizens by \$2 million in the first two quarters of this year," said Gordon. "At the time, everybody clapped their hands, but I wondered why did it take so long to bring this issue to the forefront? I came before you six times to raise this taxation issue, but no one ever took me seriously or did anything about it."

The overbilling occurred when a city official misinterpreted definitions of two different forms of tax rates which were provided to state officials. The overcharge was planned to be rectified through reductions in what would have been the expected quarterly amounts through the 2010 fiscal year. That reduction has not occurred as the city's budget has not been approved.

So now, Gordon said, she and Morton wanted the chance to publicly talk about the apparent breakdown in city government that allowed her to be charged a 25 percent tax increase even though it was not warranted. She and Morton also said they wanted to do it as a means of educating the public on how residents and taxpayers in Orange can hold government and their elected officials accountable for their actions, mistakes and failures to act when action is needed.

"I think what Miss Gordon tried to represent to the council is that this is a teachable moment," said resident Gloria Stewart. "I feel as though I was duped as a taxpayer because of the overage that we were forced to pay. I represent the 58 percent of Orange residents and taxpayers that are also paying taxes in this town."

Stewart's last comment was a reference to former Councilman Bill Lewis' earlier statement that he and other taxpayers from the city's South Ward are responsible for paying 42 percent of Orange's property taxes. He admonished some of his detractors that they needed to show more consideration for himself and others from his ward.

"My concern is motivating this council to give the citizens of Orange the best representation possible," said Lewis. "I don't wear an afro or a dashiki. I'm just Bill Lewis. I represent the South Ward that pays 42 percent of the taxes in town and the ones who worked hard in the civil rights movement, the struggle to integrate Orange and empower minorities and others, and are generally the professional people with degrees who have worked hard to get where they are in life."

Lewis said it is the council's job and responsibility to "protect people who come up to speak" during their meetings. He said he can appreciate Gordon and her recent contribution to Orange's residents when she forced public officials, such as Kelly, to correctly do their jobs."