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Selectmen offer a plan in Holland

By Mairgread O' Meara

HOLLAND -- The Board of Selectmen is trying to pull the town out of a financial morass begun years ago by former town officials.

The board distributed a report on 106 formerly town-owned properties that have caused the loss of \$60,707.77 in taxes for the town.

The loss in taxes with these properties is only part of the picture. Another \$163,000 remains in uncollectible taxes on other properties. These are monies that the former Tax Collector Jean Rozema failed to collect. (She later was convicted of embezzling \$110,000. The town recovered \$47,000 of that from the bonding company for the years she was bonded, 1983-1988. She was not bonded from 1988-1991.)

During this week's selectmen's meeting, Chairman James R. Foley had a file cabinet with three drawers wheeled into the room. He pulled open the bottom drawer and said the files represented more than \$5 million in assessed value -- properties in land court that were foreclosed. Foley said \$78,000 in taxes will not be collected this year alone.

Foley then pulled out the middle drawer and said, "These people got scared and paid their taxes." The properties had been foreclosed on but the people bought them back. Finally, Foley pulled open the top drawer and said there were 150 more properties with liens on them -- not foreclosed yet; the owners will either pay the taxes or not.

Two plans to bring financial relief to the town were offered. Both would not raise taxes anymore than the current 30 percent raised now.

The first plan, by Selectman Guy J. Barbieri, suggests freezing the budget prior to the FY94 override. The \$314,000 override would be used to pay the \$183,000 and the difference put back in the budget.

The second plan, proposed by Foley, would also not raise taxes again. His plan would take two years to pay and freezes the budget at FY95. Part of his plan would give \$18,000 for town hall salary increases; \$30,000 to computerize the town hall so "problems like this would hopefully never happen again"; and put \$90,000 in the overlay deficit account. Next year, all but the computer account would apply.

Later, Selectman Thomas F. O'Connell said the budget prior to override has merit but the override was necessary - to maintain minimum town services.

"The tax rate went up 30 percent," said Foley. "You have to understand the problem did not start here - it goes back years. Those in the past did not do their work. It's not this administration's fault. We have to pay because of the past, not because of this administration."

Former Assessor Earl Johnson could not be reached for comment.