

PROPERTY TAX RELIEF PART ONE PASSES SENATE

By Brandon Beard
Staff Writer

■ (GIT) Senate lawmakers Wednesday passed a the first half of a two-part property tax relief package designed to reduce many Oklahoma property owners' ad valorem taxes.

SB681, by Sen. Penny Williams, D-Tulsa, would change the annual income limit allowed for a double homestead exemption of \$2,000 to \$20,000 per year from \$10,000.

In addition, the bill raises the minimum income allowed to receive an income tax credit if property taxes reach more than one percent of the owner's annual earnings. Under the measure the minimum would be raised to \$12,000 from \$10,000 annually.

When asked why she was bringing the legislation in light of the recent State Question 669 defeat, which if passed, would have rolled the state's property taxes back to the 1993 level, Williams said the measure is an attempt to correct problems that are still present in the ad valorem system. She added that just because Oklahomans voted against 669, does not mean problems with the system do not still exist.

"There are many Oklahomans who are working as hard as they possibly can, yet do not earn a lot of money," she said. "We want to make it easier for those families and individuals to make ends meet."

Under the bill, counties would be reimbursed by the state for the loss of revenue resulting from the raised income limits. Though the measure would be revenue neutral to the state this year, two years from now the bill could carry a projected \$2.6 million price tag, unless funds are placed back into the system to cover the loss.

"We're not taking any money away from education," she said, addressing concerns about losses to the state's primary educational funding source. "I think we can afford \$2.6 million to reimburse the counties."

Supporting the measure, Sen. Keith Leftwich, D-Oklahoma City, said the measure was proof that legislators do listen to the people of Oklahoma.

The measure also contains a provision

requiring an itemized statement of how ad valorem taxes are being spent to accompany all tax notices.

"Oklahomans want and deserve greater accountability from the public institutions they support," Williams said. "This provision gives them the information they need to understand how their tax dollars are being used."

The second half of the property tax reform initiative is expected in upcoming days in the form of a joint resolution. The measure will aim to:

- ✓ Cap property tax growth at a rate of five percent annually on locally assessed real property.

- ✓ Roll assessment ratios back to the 1995 level, permanently.

- ✓ Hold valuations on properties of senior citizens earning less than \$25,000 per year.

The resolution will make necessary constitutional changes to implement the reform.

"Major fluctuations in property taxes will become a thing of the past under this legislation," said Senate President Pro Tempore Stratton Taylor, D-Claremore.



Sen. Penny Williams

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ers in the department's budget.

Combined, the proposed funding increase would represent a 22.5 percent increase in the department's funding.

Funding for the Pardon and Parole Board would increase 5.3 percent under the terms of the bill, with more than one-half of the \$90,000 in additional funding being earmarked for the employee pay raise and increased OPERS contribution. Other additional funding in the bill includes:

- ✓ \$13,000 to restore funds removed in the general appropriations bill; and

- ✓ \$19,552 to cover the actual cost of certain benefits.

"The constant danger to democracy lies in the tendency of the individual to hide himself in the crowd — to defend his own failure to act forthrightly according to conviction under the false excuse that the effort of one in one hundred forty million has no significance."

Dwight D. Eisenhower
June 9, 1946

GAS CAP INTEGRITY BILL PASSES HOUSE

By Shawn Ashley
Staff Writer

■ (GIT) The House on Wednesday gave approval to the so-called gas cap integrity bill, a bill its author said is designed to help Tulsa and possibly Oklahoma counties deal with air quality issues.

Rep. Russ Roach, D-Tulsa and author of **HB2346**, called the

proposal "the best option" for municipalities in trouble with the Environmental Protection Agency to deal with air quality issues.

Under the terms of the bill, local

government entities would be able to enact ordinances mandating gas cap integrity tests. Those tests would determine whether a gas cap properly seals a gas tank and prevents the loss of ozone-damaging fumes.

Municipalities could only enact such ordinances, Roach told House members, when cited by the EPA for violations of air quality standards.

Without the proposed law, Roach also said, counties with air quality problems, most notably Tulsa County, could find themselves under orders from the EPA to sell only gasoline reformulated to diminish emissions or limited in their industrial development capabilities.

Rep. Forrest Claunch, R-Midwest City, joined Roach in support of the bill, saying, "It's the simplest way to effectively remedy an unfortunate situation."

Rep. Richard Phillips, R-Warr Acres, disagreed with Claunch and Roach, warn-

ing that the bill could lead to conflicts between individual cities within one county and between city and county governments.

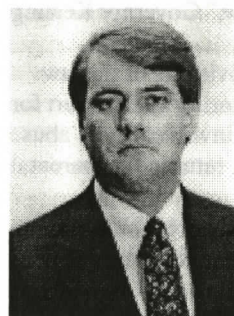
"The EPA's rules have not stayed the same," Phillips also argued, referring to the provision in the proposed law

that makes the tests dependent on an EPA citation. "They've changed, and when people

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Rep. Russ Roach



Rep. Richard Phillips