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## Feeling the Pinch

by Will Dendis

Well, the dreaded "r" word has been uttered so many times in the past few months it appears we've willed ourselves into a recession. Or maybe it's the other way around; I was never too good with direct cause and effect. In any case, consumer confidence is way down, which means Americans are going to be thinking twice before spending beyond their means ... possibly even saving some money. That's not necessarily a bad thing. While the economy is overwhelmingly consumer driven, personal debt is at an all-time high. Maybe a little doom and gloom is just the thing. The generation that came of age during the great depression knew how to save money. We don't.

Over the next month or so, there will be three votes affecting local taxes here in Saugerties. The first will most likely take place April 21, and it won't be a public vote. The village board will decide then whether to approve the proposed budget, which calls for a four percent tax increase. At this point, there's probably not much that can be done to avoid this, but it does raise the old specter of town and village consolidation. When taxes stay the same for six years, such demands are limited to a dull hum. But when they go up, people start asking what exactly it is they're paying for. And that conversation needs to include everybody, not the few dozen for whom consolidation is a pet issue and the village employees who feel threatened by it.

Two public votes are on the horizon as well. According to preliminary estimates, the school tax levy was due to come in at \$28,132,715, an increase of \$2,274,890, or 8.8 percent over last year. These numbers were devised based on erstwhile Governor Spitzer's proposed state aid numbers, which, as of Wednesday, April 9, have been increased to the tune of at least \$400,000. Saugerties Central School District business administrator Joe Dziadik is still hard at work figuring out what that will mean for the tax rate, but generally speaking, it should be reduced. That election is May 20.

Perhaps the most direct "yay or nay" style vote will be the May 7 library renovation/expansion bond vote. At \$7 million or bust, voters will have a clear choice between a palpable new library addition and no change at all. (Frankly, you need to pay someone to comb through the village or school budgets for signs of wasteful spending.) There will be a scoping session at the senior center this week -- April 14, 7 p.m., to be exact. **The architect's vision of the addition is beautiful; a seamless expansion on the old Carnegie original.** The scoping session promises a "virtual tour," so that should include more details on what the inside will look like. The laundry list of improvements trustees routinely tout is so vast it's hard for anyone not intimately familiar with the building to visualize. This should help.

Ideally, the pervading sense of penny-pinching won't lead to reactionary 'nay' votes on these proposals, but a greater degree of voter scrutiny that will lead to more informed decisions. Maybe in better times, those who would vote yes on the library and school proposals would do so out of habit, in support of the children and the future, etc. Maybe those who vote against it would do likewise, claiming taxes are already at super-saturation and any increase must be nullified. When every dollar beyond the basic essentials matters, more questions should be asked about where it goes. The worthiness of public spending projects/budgets should stand or fall based on the convictions of informed voters.

But maybe it's naive to think that way. Maybe welcoming greater scrutiny to votes calling for higher taxes is code for "vote this down." I hope that's not the case.