

Alliance finds inequity in railroad property taxes

By Mary Jo Pitzl

A question of fundamental fairness concerning proper tax assessment of railroad property has prompted a group of Lincoln citizens to approach the Lancaster County Board for answers on the issue.

The Lincoln Alliance, an organization of 26 community groups, has uncovered tax assessment facts that present the possibility of inequities on terminal property owned by the Omaha, Lincoln and Beatrice Railway Company (OL&B), according to Rose Meile, executive vice president of the alliance. Those possible inequities could represent a tax break for the OL&B, and unfair and unnecessary taxes for Lincoln citizens, Meile said.

Areas of OB&L property being questioned by the Alliance as representing inequities include a tract of land at 48th and Garland streets, currently being used for commercial purposes. Of the nine lots owned by OL&B, a 1975 tax list showed a \$3,250 assessment for the terminal property, compared to a \$7,380 assessment for lands of comparable size and location used for commercial purposes.

Three executive members of the group, Coleen Seng, president; Byron Peterson, vice president; and Meile met Tuesday afternoon with County Commissioners Bruce Hamilton, Robert Colin, and Jan Gauger. Approximately 55 alliance members also attended the informal meeting,

which preceded the county board's regular meeting. Colin said alliance business would not be discussed at the meeting because it was not on the agenda, but he added that there would probably be "some feet dragging" on the issue.

The alliance presented several tracts of terminal property that they feel represent "appropriate inequities," Seng said.

Terminal property is defined as land that is actively used by the railroad (in this case, OL&B), said Don Wesley, a UNL senior. Wesley, who has done research on the issue for the alliance, said land that lies vacant or that does not have railroad property built on it should not be classified as terminal property.

Many parts of OL&B's terminal property have changed in function from when they were first assigned, Peterson said. They now serve strictly commercial purposes. This property needs to be re-classified to receive proper tax assessment, Peterson said.

The question of proper classification for unused terminal property concerns the alliance. OL&B assessments are made by the company itself, and this self-assessment is submitted to County Assessor Fritz Meyer for review, Peterson said.

The tax assessments are used to classify county property classification," Wesley said, since OL&B terminal land is not being used as it is intended.

The inequity of OL&B self-assessments and terminal property classifications were the main concerns of the alliance at the Tuesday meeting. Executive Vice President Meile outlined three focuses of the group on this issue: to present samples of lots under-assessed by OL&B, to point out that the two people responsible for monitoring assessment of this land (county assessor and the state tax commissioner) have not been doing their job, and to show that the county taxpayers will have to carry the major part of the tax load created by these inequities.

Hamilton said he will investigate the Nebraska law concerning terminal property with County Atty. Ron Lahners.

At a post-meeting conference of alliance members, Meile said the group will put pressure on Lahners to speed investigation of the matter.

"This inequity will affect all of us as taxpayers," Meile added.

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Litter program capitalizes on youth

If the sight of kids wearing kangaroo aprons and picking up trash at the state fair grounds made you think twice about littering, then the "Litternaut" program worked.

Describing the State Fair Board as "more than pleased," the chairwoman of the Governor's Council to Keep Nebraska Beautiful (KNB) suggested at the group's meeting Tuesday that the program be continued again next year.

Mrs. Les Anderson said the sight of youth collecting litter tends to make adults ashamed of their carelessness.

KNB is financed by the Nebraska Legislature. Members of the governor-appointed council are from private and government sectors.

"We would like to see Nebraska be a better place to live," Anderson said, adding that the council promotes citizen action.

The "Litternaut" program is part of its work with Lincoln youth. The council also has a film library used by public schools. The school program urges students not to litter and to recycle trash, Anderson said.

KNB members also discussed the Nebraska Environment Month (NEAM). NEAM is part of a two-month project to get people to promote community environmental improvement, Anderson said.

Prizes are awarded and all participants given a certificate signed by Gov. J. James Exon, Anderson said.

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