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Video uses Grim Reaper, MLK to attack county officials over reassessments



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Apr 4, 2017



An image from the video on the Lancaster Property Owners Fed Up Facebook page shows Lancaster County commissioners Craig Lehman, Josh Parsons and Dennis Stuckey.

LANCASTER PROPERTY OWNERS FED UP

The Grim Reaper makes an appearance. Cloak, scythe and all.

So, too, does slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr.

A mysterious 3-minute video being shared on social media uses both visages — the former to warn of doom, the latter as a call to protest — to attack Lancaster County officials and the ongoing [reassessment process](#) as an “unprecedented display of hypocrisy and greed.”

“In their wake will be left only a parade of engorged local government spending, luxurious buildings and Cadillac pensions for the commissioners’ administration,” states the video, posted by a group called [Lancaster Property Owners Fed Up](#).



Preliminary reassessment values provide only a hint of possible tax increases, decreases

The makers of the video are not identified and could not be reached for comment, but Commissioner Josh Parsons described the production as a “cowardly” attack likely made by a political insider motivated by politics and not the assessment process.

Still, the video — which has been viewed nearly 6,000 times since being posted last week — marks an odd twist to a process that historically has been fraught with controversy, misinformation and accusations of political funny business.

It has been met on Facebook with anger, bemusement and a fair amount of skepticism — a good thing, given the number of misstatements of fact.

“This is nothing more than a scare tactic. Paying taxes is part of living in a progressive society. God help us when that is no longer the case,” wrote a Facebook poster named Andrew Weiss.

Another viewer, however, had a different take, describing the reassessment as a “fleecing” of taxpayers. “I’m tired of these idiots thinking they have an open checkbook,” wrote Craig Stipe.

Parsons and his fellow commissioners Dennis Stuckey and Craig Lehman are rebuking the video.

Preliminary notices — part of the first countywide reassessment since 2005 — went out to all Lancaster County property owners last month. The notices revealed that assessed property values increased 34.5 percent, on average, countywide.



[Questions and answers on Lancaster County property tax reassessment](#)

That doesn't mean taxes are going up, though.

It's too soon to generate specific estimates of tax increases or decreases, and the use of averages only provides a clue. A more accurate indicator will be how much a community's total taxable assessed value increases. And those totals won't be determined until assessment appeals have been settled and owners of rural land have had their Clean and Green tax reductions factored in around June 1. Clean and Green assesses land based on its use, rather than its market value.

But the preliminary notices appeared to be enough to rile up some backlash against county officials.

The three-minute video opens with images of Lancaster County farmland and sunny skies. A male voiceover describes "the diverse community of hardworking and honest people" as it displays video of an older couple walking hand-in-hand and what seems like a mother and daughter playing on a tree swing.

But the serenity quickly transforms into dark images of the county courthouse and cloudy, rainy skies. The trio of commissioners are shown repeatedly in coats and hats. The grim reaper appears as the voiceover says the commissioners approved spending "millions to calculate your new assessment."

Eventually, the voiceover reads a Martin Luther King, Jr. quote in an attempt to inspire citizens into action.

Breaking Lancaster - Rogue Tax Rea...
Posted by Lancaster Property Owners...
13,056 Views

Attempts by LNP to identify and contact "Lancaster Property Owners Fed Up" were not successful.

Parsons called the anonymity behind the the ad "cowardly."

"The video is a slick attack ad — likely orchestrated by a political insider for political reasons entirely unrelated to reassessment," Parsons wrote in an email to LNP.

He said the ad falsely refers to him being a commissioner when the reassessment process was approved (he was elected afterward, in 2015), and it lies about the reassessment as a way for the county to raise revenue. As LNP previously reported, taxing authorities will have to reduce millage rates this fall to ensure overall property tax revenue remains neutral in the reassessment process.

Any tax increases would require a separate vote — just as in any other year. But counties and municipalities cannot raise taxes more than 10 percent in a reassessment year.

John Mavrides, director of the county assessment office, who was also named in the video, said he would defer comment to the commissioners.

Mavrides told LNP last month that the reassessment process cost the county about \$800,000 over three years — not the “millions” that is referred to in the video. Mavrides said the county did the appraisal in-house rather than hire an outside firm that would have cost up to \$8 million.

Commissioner Craig Lehman called the clip misleading at its best, and inaccurate at its worst.

In an email, he noted that the makers of the video did not seem to understand that commissioners passed the resolution establishing the current reassessment in 2015. There is also “no hidden tax increase in reassessment,” Lehman said.

Commissioner Dennis Stuckey said including Mavrides in the accusations was “disgraceful.”

“Elected officials are fair game to criticism and we understand that, but our staff is only carrying out the policies for reassessment as set in Resolution #81 of 2015,” Stuckey wrote in an email. “It is totally unfair to have included any staff in this video.”

FACT CHECK

Here's a fact check of the social media campaign being run by a group called Lancaster Property Owners Fed Up.

Statement: “Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, is a diverse community of hard-working and honest people. But now, for both lifelong residents who have made Lancaster County the incredible place it is today as well as new residents who will continue to cultivate its growth for generations to come, we are being suffocated by a local government agency staff with calculating bureaucrats.

“The Lancaster County tax office and director John Mavrides are dramatically increasing property valuations. Lancaster County homeowners are already taxed at alarming rates. And now this unchecked agency is imposing a massive property tax increase across the county.”

The facts: Neither John Mavrides, the director of assessment for the county, nor the Property Assessment Office have the authority to increase county, school or municipal property taxes. Only the county commissioners have the power to set the county's millage rate. And only school districts can set school-tax millage rates.

Also, the Property Assessment Office is not “unchecked.” It reports to the county commissioners.

Statement: “The Lancaster County commissioners have allowed a ... tax resolution put in place back in 1996 to prevail over new assessments, resulting in a massive property tax increase. In fact, they're spending millions to calculate your new assessment.”

The facts: The county has said the appraisal process was done in-house and cost about \$800,000 over three years.

Statement: “These same commissioners are all in favor of using this 20-year-old resolution to dramatically increase property valuations in an unprecedented display of hypocrisy and greed.”