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Take my money, please - it's yours - Well-to-do Jews at forefront of tax-hike push

by Adam Kredo Staff Writer

David Rosenblatt recently partied with about 16 of his closest neighbors.

The guests munched snacks and sipped beer in Rosenblatt's living room, but they were drawn there by more than food, drink and the opportunity to socialize. They had a political mission to carry out, albeit an unconventional one. The purpose of the get-together was to push for higher taxes by emphasizing the virtue of paying them.

Rosenblatt, a 30-year-old District resident, isn't the only D.C. Jew to host a tax-hike house party in recent weeks. Generally upper-middle-class residents, they say they were motivated to act by concern over the the city's crippling budget shortfall and proposals to reduce it by slashing safety-net services for the poor.



Zachary Teutsch, standing, a co-chair of Jews United for Justice's "Invest in D.C." campaign, leads a tax-hike house party. Photo courtesy JUFJ

To prevent that outcome, Rosenblatt and other like-minded District dwellers are opening their homes in order to convince neighbors and friends that it's time for them to shoulder a greater tax burden.

"D.C. is a pretty wonky crowd," said Rosenblatt, a member of Jews United for Justice, a liberal advocacy group.

"I don't know many places where you can get people excited to talk about a municipal budget, but people were interested. It was really sort of a fun neighborhood gathering."

With the District facing a \$322 million budget gap, Mayor Vincent Gray recently proposed nearly \$190 million in spending cuts, many of which would gut D.C.'s social service programs, such as affordable housing initiatives and mental health services. Gray's proposal, though, also includes a modest tax increase on those earning more than \$200,000 a year.

Residents such as Zach Teutsch say that Gray's proposal, which would bump the income tax rate from 8.5 to 8.9 percent, doesn't go far enough. He and other supporters of JUFJ's "Invest in D.C." campaign would like to see a tax increase for those earning \$100,000 and above. "I personally have the capacity to pay more taxes and would love to do so" in order to preserve critical social programs, said Teutsch, who would not be affected by Gray's tax proposal. "I'm willing to pay more than a modest amount of money."

Recent polls indicate that few D.C. residents are tax-hike-averse. Eighty-five percent of them support Gray's tax proposal, according to a poll commissioned by the D.C. Fiscal Policy Institute, a liberal think-tank that supports tax hikes. What's more, 91 percent of residents living in Wards 2 and 3 - which have the largest concentration of Jews - are in favor of paying higher taxes.

"It comes down to values," said Daniel Solomon, who calculated that he would pay about \$1,500 more in taxes if Gray's proposal passes the D.C. Council, which seems unlikely. "These are hard times and everybody should be pitching in."

Under the current District tax system, everyone making more than \$40,000 is taxed at the same rate, meaning that a resident earning \$50,000, for instance, pays the same rate as someone earning \$1 million or more. JUFJ and other tax activists argue that this formula makes little sense in a city rife with big earners. They believe that those living comfortably have an obligation to pay more for social services generally used by those who aren't. Judaism, added Solomon, 51, "is pretty clear that all members of the community are required to contribute their share to the community. My mother always said that taxes are the price we pay to live in a free society, and I think she's right."

The D.C. Council, which will vote on the budget later this month, seems to see things differently. Chairman Kwame Brown has come out strongly against the mayor's proposal, and some members equate tax increases with


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...and Brown has come out strongly against the mayor's proposal, and some members equate tax increases with political suicide.

Faced with this tough sell, Rabbi Jessica Olean, a JUFJ board member, recently testified before the council in favor of progressive tax hikes.

"Spending other people's money is easy - what is hard is to say, 'Here - take mine,' " Olean, an associate rabbi at D.C.'s Reform Temple Sinai, said, according to a transcript of her testimony. "I asked my congregants to reach into their own pockets to solve problems they didn't create and have worked very hard in their own lives to avoid."

"Let us make your job easier," Olean added. "Take my money and together we will build a great city."

Not all residents, however, believe that higher taxes are a magic bullet capable of curing the city's budget crisis.

"It sounds like this group is confusing tzedakah ... with coercing everybody to pay [more] taxes," said Ilya Shapiro, 33, a senior fellow in constitutional studies at the Conservative Cato Institute. "There's nothing preventing people from donating more to the D.C. Treasury. If you want to pay more, you're welcome to do so."

Given D.C.'s history of mismanagement and waste, Shapiro noted, it makes more sense for concerned citizens to contribute to charities, rather than the city's coffers. "The D.C. bureaucracy is famously one of the more inefficient ones," he explained. "If you're thinking of increasing or improving social services, there are better ways of doing that than giving more tax revenue to the D.C. government."

Higher tax rates also could deter people from moving to D.C. - and force others to flee.

"The D.C. government doesn't act in a vacuum," Shapiro said. "There are lots of choices where you can live and where you can base your business. ... You don't necessarily have to live or spend your money in the district, and actions like this one would further deter people from doing so."

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