

Janis Ringhand: Legislative leaders support property tax increase for homeowners

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Earlier this week, Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R-Juneau) and Assembly Speaker Robin Vos (R-Burlington) declared that legislation to reign in the “Dark Store” property tax scheme will not be addressed in the final weeks of the legislative session. I have joined more than 60 legislators from all parts of Wisconsin to introduce two bi-partisan bills to reign in the Dark Store problem.

Simply put, failure to address the Dark Store tax scheme will lead to property tax increases for homeowners throughout Wisconsin.

Here’s how Dark Store tax scheme works. Big Box retailers have developed the “Dark Store Theory” to lower the value of their commercial property and shift their property tax burden onto local homeowners. Using the Dark Store theory, corporate tax lawyers argue that new, fully operational Big Box stores be assessed at the same value as the empty, abandoned store they have left behind.

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The corporate attorneys then seek massive property tax refunds from municipalities and threaten to sue if their request is rejected. They know that the deep pockets of the Big Box chains can extend a lawsuit for years and pressure the municipalities to settle for far less than the Big Box chain would pay under normal circumstances. This increases property taxes for homeowners, often by hundreds of dollars a year.

Make no mistake, by shifting the property tax burden, the Big Box chains are

sticking it to local homeowners. From my vantage point, it seems that the only people who believe the Dark Store tax scheme is fair are the lawyers who developed the scheme, the lobbyists defending the scheme and the Big Box corporations who are making both rich.

Many say that as partisan legislative leaders, Majority Leader Fitzgerald and Speaker Vos are merely making a political calculation. They would rather risk raising the property taxes for thousands of homeowners throughout the state than stand up to some of their biggest political supporters.

The Dark Store legislation that I have co-sponsored are two of the most bi-partisan pieces of legislation to be introduced this session. Legislators from all parts of the state, Republican and Democrat, have joined to oppose the Dark Store tax scheme.

The Dark Store legislation has been unanimously approved by the Senate Committee on Revenue, Financial Institutions and Rural Affairs and would likely pass by wide margins, if only Senator Fitzgerald and Speaker Vos would allow them to come to a vote. But the lobbyists for the Big Box chains know that they only need the support of Majority Leader Fitzgerald, Speaker Vos and Governor Walker to stick it to homeowners and keep the Dark Store tax scheme in place.

— *Ringhand, D-Evansville, represents the 15th Senate District.*