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EDITORIAL: Town non-profits all deserve same break as Cabela's

By: Bill Doak , editor

America is a prosperous nation, and Connecticut ranks among the most prosperous of the prosperous.

One of the claims of this past political season was the payback per capita state citizens get for the taxes they pay. Since Connec ranks as an expensive place in which to live, work and play in, the salaries demanded by those who provide us with basic servic costlier, which in turn makes taxes go up, which makes Connecticut life costlier, etc. If you chose to live here, you get the pictu

And that is not even counting the rising cost of college tuition, health care and insurance each of which have their own tornado-like economic spirals driving them.

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But who would do without the benefit of police and fire protection, health care, retirement, weather reports, disaster warnings, public education availability and social welfare programs? You can't have good services without having to pay for them, and having to pay means having to pay taxes.

As a society we make allowances for organizations, such as non-profits, to ease the tax burden. Hospitals, universities, government buildings, utilities, temples, churches and football stadiums serving society's "greater good" are deemed to exist in a way that outweighs their tax-paying obligation. That "greater good" notion can be extended to private, for-profit businesses as well. The East Hartford Town Council is in the process of formalizing its tax abatement policies. It needs to happen.

East Hartford recently granted tax breaks to Cabela's with the expectation they will bring 350 jobs and build a \$49-million retail store at United Technologies Corporation-owned Rentschler Field. The 7-year deal was worth \$6.7 million. The argument - that the land, as is, would bring far less to the town, is a specious one. The town still must provide police and fire protection to that \$49 million property, something that is a lot more complex and expensive than had the town be charged with safeguarding the nest of a dozen grasshopper sparrows.

Should East Hartford public safety fail in its duties to protect the new Cabela's and the people in and around the store, few doubt lawsuit would be filed just because the town granted the retail store a 7-year tax break.

And even as the town goes forward with plans to build a new fire station at Main and Brewer streets it is noteworthy that, among functions, the fire station will be there to protect new Rentschler development at the same time the town is not getting any tax relief on that development. Police officers are capable of patrolling Cabela's loading docks and investigating crime in the parking lots at Field. But that manpower has a cost, of course. And that officer's time spent at Cabela's is time spent away from the regular patrol he or she now performs for us. For all East Hartford taxpayers, these are not insignificant sacrifices.

The debate goes to the heart of today's public policy approach to economic development. Those favoring a more liberal tax break argue it is the only sure-fire way to attract new businesses to East Hartford.

But what about East Hartford's traditional institutions, such as the East Hartford Elks? Located on a 6.5-acre parcel on Roberts Road, less than a mile from the new Cabela's, the East Hartford Elks Lodge is on the market. The Elks may be considered a non-profit, but they pay their taxes - around \$30,000 per year. The Elks' lodge is current on its tax bill. But that bill is \$30,000 more a year than Cabela's pay on its new \$49 million building generating sales of \$65 million a year until the year 2014.

Perhaps the Town Council's ordinance committee ought to consider a special tax category for civic organizations that return a community benefit. Should other civic clubs such as the Moose Family Center and the Knights of Columbus, be paying town taxes? And, if so, are at it, private non-profits such as Glenbrooke Swim & Tennis Club ought to be able to apply for special tax relief.

It seems unfair to see corporate entities, new to town, granted massive tax breaks for building here while bedrock civic institutions like the Elks receive no tax consideration.

These institutions are the very fabric of our town. They are much more than bricks and mortar, rental hall and parking lot - they home to individuals who reflect the best image of East Hartford in a way no marketing consultant ever could.

Plus they volunteer to help run these places, turning on the lights, opening the windows and doors and putting out the welcome others.

Some at Town Hall tremble at the notion of losing the \$30,000 in taxes that Elks Lodge pays the town. But East Hartford gets tl \$30,000 back - and more - just by having a place such as the Elks Lodge, and its members, open and available to all. Cabela's is member of every community it serves, and will start up some terrific programs here, no doubt. The taxidermy exhibit will even elk or two.

But considering all the East Hartford Elks Lodge and its members have done for so many different East Hartford organizations years, from the Senior Citizens Picnic to the Make-A-Wish Foundation to the reception after the Memorial Day parades, someh a trophy stuffed elk at Rentschler Field just won't feel right.

A horizontal banner with a green background. On the left, the Vonage logo is displayed in white. Next to it is a cartoon illustration of a man with red hair, glasses, and a green shirt. To the right of the illustration, the text reads: "HOW MANY **NEEDS** DOES IT TAKE TO INSTALL **VONAGE** INTERNET PHONE SERVICE?" The words "NEEDS", "VONAGE", and "SERVICE?" are in red, while the other words are in black.

HOW MANY **NEEDS** DOES IT
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