

Will Leno fans stay up to watch Conan O'Brien? 1E



NO MERCY!

BLACKHAWKS, WINGS BATTLE WITH ELBOWS, STICKS, BODY-ROCKING HITS
SPORTS, 1C, 6C



Sunday Free Press

5.24.2009 ♦♦†

www.freep.com

On guard for 178 years

MITCH ALBOM

Window view can change our attitude toward life



NEWS+VIEWS, 25A



REGINA H. BOONE/Detroit Free Press

BEACH BLING

Jewels, sequins, stripes make swimsuits dazzle

LIFE, 1D

HOME BUYERS

How much house can you get for \$500K?

REAL ESTATE, 1F

72

57

High

Low

A few clouds but ...
No rain to ruin cookouts!
FORECAST, 2A

Index	
Entertainment...1E	Metro8A
Free Press	Michigan ...16A
Editorials...28A	Life.....1D
Detroit News	Movies6E
Editorials...31A	Puzzles9D
Deaths...18-20A	Real Estate...1F
Horoscope2D	Travel.....8E



Vol. 179, Number 20
© 2009
Detroit Free Press Inc.
Printed in the U.S.



\$1.50
(\$1.75 outside Wayne, Oakland & Macomb counties)

To save millions of dollars, Michigan plans to release about 3,000 prisoners by October

FREED FELONS HOW SAFE ARE WE?



BRIAN KAUFMAN/Detroit Free Press

Monica Hankins teaches a victim-impact class at Ryan Correctional Facility in Detroit earlier this month.

Some fear more crime; state assures safety

By DAWSON BELL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Part one of a two-part series

Anearly 30-year-old Michigan prison policy — roughly characterized as: “When in doubt, lock ‘em up” — is ending.

In the midst of — and partly in response to — the economic crisis, many of the state’s expensive prison cells are being emptied.

Gov. Jennifer Granholm announced in February plans to downsize the state’s prison population, by about 3,000 by Oct. 1, effectively ending an era in which policymakers built more prisons,

enacted tougher sentences and hired parole board members conditioned to “just say no.”

The questions are: Who are the people the state has decided don’t belong in prison? Can we be comfortable with them on our streets and in our neighborhoods?

The Free Press attempted to answer the first question by looking at 318 parolees released in December under similar criteria to those being released this year. Most have committed violent acts in the past — murder, armed robbery, rape and assault, among others. But relatively few — 29 of the 318 as of late last week — had gone

off the tracks again. None had committed a new, violent crime in the latest months of parole.

The answer to the second question depends on whom you ask. Granholm and top corrections officials insist downsizing can be done safely if enough care is taken to manage parolees before and after their release.

Skeptics, led by the state’s elected county prosecutors, doubt it will happen.

“There will be more crime,” says Saginaw County Prosecutor Mike Thomas.

■ TOUGHER RULES ENACTED AFTER 2 EX-CONS WENT ON TO KILL. 14A.

FreePress.com Video of a victim's fear and parolee's new life. Plus a freed felon database.



ANDRE J. JACKSON/Detroit Free Press

JoAnn Watson’s home on Sturtevant in Detroit. City records show that it is a vacant lot.

\$68

Councilwoman paid pittance for taxes on ‘nonexistent’ Detroit house

By M.L. ELRICK and NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Detroit City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson paid only \$68 in property taxes this year because city records say her well-kept, brick Tudor-style home doesn’t exist. Although the home has occupied its west-side plot since 1926, city records have classified the parcel as an empty lot for the past decade.

Watson said she was unaware of the discrepancy until the Free Press contacted her.

“I pay the taxes. All I know is I had a big drop when my house got hit hard by a tornado,” she said. “We had great damage.”

Watson said she could not recall the specific date the tornado hit, saying it might have been 2002, or perhaps 1993.

She acknowledged, however, that she never reported the incident. National Weather Service meteorologists said the last tornadoes to hit Detroit occurred in 1996 and 1997 — before Watson says her taxes were reduced because of what she called “the natural disaster.”

Watson, who said she receives her property tax bill separate from her mortgage bill, said she never questioned why her taxes dropped — or why they didn’t increase after she repaired her home.

“If it’s an amount that’s been determined by the people who are in the business of assessing ... and you pay that, then what’s the issue?” she asked.

Watson’s neighbors in comparable homes pay \$2,000 to \$6,500 in taxes. “My house has always been there,” she said.

On Friday morning, Watson entered the city tax assessor’s office and asked for a review of her tax bill.

■ CRUSADING CITY COUNCILWOMAN HASN’T GIVEN DETROIT ITS FAIR SHARE OF TAXES. 4A



JoAnn Watson

HEROIC TEEN FOLLOWED IN HERO DAD’S FOOTSTEPS

By JEFF SEIDEL
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

There are heroes among us, everyday heroes who never get recognized.

Some will say Master Sgt. Michael Wert became a hero the moment he left Alma and joined the Marine Corps. He served in relative obscurity, another veteran doing his job, just like millions before him.

Others will say he became a hero on a spring day two years ago, when he ran into the Atlantic Ocean and tried to save two children who were drowning. Without thinking. Without hesitation. Risking his own life for someone else. But is that surprising? Really? For a Marine, whose dress uniform was filled up with honors

and awards? What did he do in the military to earn those awards? His wife still doesn’t know. His career was top secret. And he didn’t feel the need to explain and make her worry.

But there are others, of course. Everyday heroes among us.

What about Drummond Figg, an emergency medical services worker who swam into that same ocean, on the same day, to try to save Wert, holding him up, sharing his breath, nearly getting lost at sea himself?

And what about Katrina Wert, the most unlikely hero of them all? A 15-year-old girl who ventured into the ocean, scared and nervous, shaking “like crazy,” following the example of her father.

Katrina would face the most difficult dilemma of all: Do you save two strangers? Or do you save your father?

■ DAD, DAUGHTER PUT LIVES ON LINE. 6A



SARAH MILLER/Special to the Free Press

Katrina Wert, 17, of Reed City runs at Pine River High in April. She gave up running after her dad died, but now she’s back at it.

Choose the health plan that fits your needs.



Choose HAP!

www.hap.org

COVER STORY

Tax crusader hasn't paid her fair share

Watson didn't question her \$68 yearly bill

By M.L. ELRICK and NAOMI R. PATTON
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Since joining the City Council six years ago, insisting that Detroit get its fair share has been one of JoAnn Watson's signature issues.

On Sept. 29, for example, Watson was the only council member to vote against a tax break for General Motors Corp. in return for building the Chevrolet Volt at its Poletown assembly plant.

As recently as Tuesday, Watson blasted state officials who she said have cut \$130 million from the city's portion of revenue sharing over the years. "They owe us," she said during a City Council meeting, demanding that the state pay the money to help Detroit through its financial crisis and reduce its deficit.

Now it turns out Watson hasn't given the faltering city its due in paying her own property taxes, records show. The Free Press discovered this week that Watson is paying \$68 a year in city taxes on her well-kept red brick Tudor-style home in the 3700 block of Sturtevant in the Russell Woods neighborhood. Neighbors with similar homes pay between \$2,000 and \$6,500 a year in city taxes.

The reason? At some point after she bought it in 1990, Watson's 83-year-old home essentially disappeared, at least as far as city assessors were concerned. They began taxing her property as a vacant lot. Watson said the change came before she was elected to City Council — and without her involvement.

Watson's failure to realize she was paying significantly less than she should is noteworthy because she occasionally admonishes city officials for not being more diligent in collecting outstanding property taxes. She says the city needs that money to reduce its deficit, which recent estimates put at close to \$300 million.

Watson, who is paid \$81,000 a year and gets a city-owned Ford Crown Victoria, said her taxes are paid in full. She said it never occurred to her that her tax bill was a fraction of what it should have been.

"I am paying what the assessor assessed," Watson said, expressing dismay when the Free Press informed her Thursday of the discrepancy.

She blamed the error on a tornado that she said struck her home several years ago. Just when is not exactly clear. She has guessed that it hit as recently as 2002 or as long ago as 1993. The National Weather Service says the last tornadoes to hit Detroit came in 1996 and 1997.

Watson bought the home on a land contract in 1990. She agreed to pay \$40,000. A year earlier, city assessors pegged the home's value at about \$37,000.

Currently, assessors calculate the property's value at \$1,658 because they consider it a vacant lot.

Watson said she noticed the drop in her property tax bill, which she handles herself, but assumed it was because the tornado left a hole in her roof

A look at property taxes in councilwoman's neighborhood

Detroit City Councilwoman JoAnn Watson paid only \$67.97 in property taxes to the City of Detroit for 2008. Her home, on the city's west side, has been assessed as if it were vacant property for the past decade. Here is how Watson's home compares with those of three neighbors:



NEXT DOOR
'08 PROPERTY TAX BILL
\$2,115.65

According to City of Detroit assessor records:
■ Built in 1960
■ Single-family home
■ Brick



JOANN WATSON'S HOUSE
'08 PROPERTY TAX BILL
\$67.97

Councilwoman JoAnn Watson leaves her home in the 3700 block of Sturtevant in Detroit on Thursday. Note: The gate belongs to the business next door.

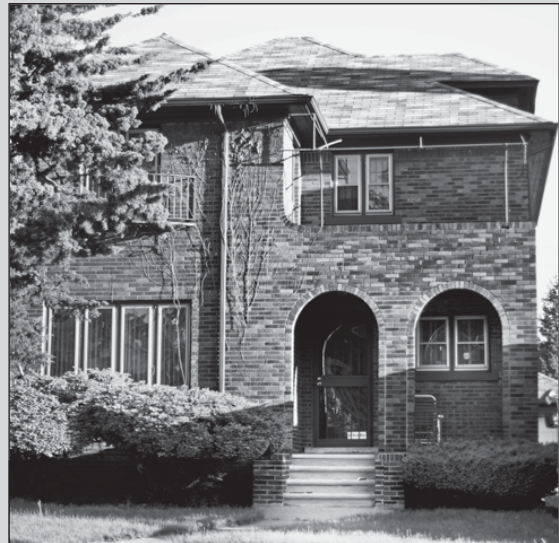
According to City of Detroit assessor records:

THIS HOUSE DOESN'T EXIST.



ACROSS THE STREET
'08 PROPERTY TAX BILL
\$5,686.39

According to City of Detroit assessor records:
■ Built in 1927
■ Single-family home
■ Brick



ACROSS THE STREET
'08 PROPERTY TAX BILL
\$6,478.17

According to City of Detroit assessor records:
■ Built in 1927
■ Single-family home
■ Brick

Sources: City of Detroit Finance Department Assessments Division and city Property Tax Office

Photos by ANDRE JACKSON; graphic by MARTHA THIERRY/Detroit Free Press

and damaged the home's foundation.

How assessors would have known that is unclear.

Linda Bade, the city's chief assessor, did not return messages Friday.

Watson said she did not call city officials or file an insurance claim. She also said she did not seek a reduction in her property taxes. Watson said that when the lower bill arrived, she simply paid it and did not ask any questions.

"I came to the natural conclusion my house isn't worth much any more," she said. "This assessment dropped because of something that had nothing to do with me."

Watson, who was elected to the City Council in 2003, said she was not a city official at the time the taxes dropped.

She said she did not rejoice in the tax break.

"In fact, I was kind of insulted," she said, adding that she feared the value of her home had plummeted.

JoAnn Watson

Age: 58

Personal: Four children

Education: University of Michigan, bachelor's degree in journalism

Experience: Detroit City Council, 2003-present; aide to U.S. Rep. John Conyers, 1997-2003; executive director of the Detroit Branch NAACP, 1990-97; executive director of the downtown Detroit YWCA

Council activity: Heads several task forces, including: Quality of Life Task Force, Environmental Task Force, Health Care Task Force, and Housing Task Force.

However, in 2002, as she prepared to run for City Council, Watson obtained a \$60,000 mortgage.

To obtain the loan, Watson acknowledged that her property was ap-

praised. But she said that appraisal did not prompt her to think that her home had regained value and, consequently, would merit an increase in her property tax bill.

She said she assumed the appraisers "used their financial wizardry" to help her get the loan on her home.

When Free Press reporters questioned Watson about her property taxes, she said she would go to the assessor's office Tuesday and say: "Are you aware you're charging me for a lot and I live in a house?"

If correcting the error generates a bill for back taxes, Watson said she will be "happy to pay it. I pay my bills."

Watson instead went to the assessor's office Friday morning, arriving just after 9.

A clerk confirmed that the property was listed as vacant.

The councilwoman said, no, there was a home on the lot, and told her

about the tornado.

Watson asked how soon her property could be reassessed.

"I don't want special treatment," she said. "I want someone to look at it."

The exchange was completed in about 10 minutes. The clerk reviewed her 2002 mortgage. And she gave Watson a form to request an assessment.

"I'll bring it back," Watson said, smiling.

One of Watson's neighbors, informed Friday of Watson's tax bill, was incredulous.

"Wow! I'm shocked," Natalie Solomon told the Free Press.

Solomon, who lives across the street from Watson, said, "I know my property taxes.

"That's not fair."

■ CONTACT NAOMI R. PATTON: 313-223-3327 OR NPATTON@FREEPRESS.COM.

■ CONTACT M.L. ELRICK: 313-222-6582 OR MLELRICK@FREEPRESS.COM

0.75%
APY
\$10,000 MINIMUM BALANCE

2X THE MARKET
AVERAGE RATE

Introducing the checking that saves.

Huntington® High Performance Checking.

Sign up today and start enjoying the checking account that rewards like savings account. Add instant online checking, the checking features that matter most to you while enjoying our Annual Percentage Yield that is twice the rate of other banks in the marketplace. Which means this new HD® insured checking product makes your money work — for you.

Stop by a Huntington banking office, call 1-800-446-3141, or visit huntington.com/highperformance.

Huntington
It's how we do it.

