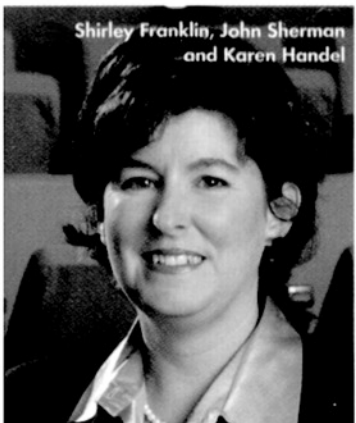
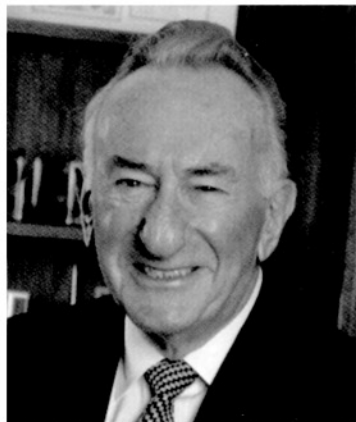


Atlanta

P O W E R & P O L I T I C S

SHERMAN'S MARCHING ORDERS

One gadfly's passion keeps **TAX RATES** center stage.



Shirley Franklin, John Sherman and Karen Handel

JOHN SHERMAN DOESN'T FRET ABOUT HIS OWN bills. A self-made real estate developer who retired 25 years ago, he is comfortably well-off and can handle a rate increase here and a tax hike there. "The people who are affected by taxes are low- and middle-income Atlantans, not people like me," he says. "You don't get a rise out of the neighbors in my Buckhead condo if you bring up property taxes in the elevator."

But Sherman obsesses over Atlanta's tax bills, and as head of the Fulton County Taxpayers Association (FCTA) he routinely scrutinizes City of Atlanta and Fulton County budgets. Toward the end of this month, expect to see the energetic octogenarian grabbing plenty of screen time on local newscasts as Fulton County mails out property tax reassessments to some 230,000 homeowners. The FCTA already has organized seminars to help residents protest their reassessments.

Until Sherman took its helm in 1999, FCTA was largely viewed as a group driven by political and cultural issues more than cost savings, representing a rift between Atlanta proper and its northern neighbors such as Sandy Springs. But Sherman has boosted FCTA's membership roster to 29,000 (nearly 80 percent are city residents) and enlisted heavy hitters such as Robert Forrestal, past president of the Atlanta Federal Reserve Bank, and Glen Robinson, founder of Scientific-

Atlanta, to its board. The organization has moved from a reactionary role to a proactive stance. In the wake of Atlanta's sewer crisis, FCTA drafted a "comprehensive plan" for cutting costs through privatization and then lobbied politicians, both local and state.

Sherman's passion for civic penury was prompted by his tenure in the early eighties as mayor of Bal Harbour, the wealthy Miami outpost. The stories of his mayoral frugality appealed to FCTA, and the group now gets plenty of attention from people in high places. A recent FCTA seminar on privatization was attended by new Fulton County

Commission Chairwoman Karen Handel, senior staffers from Mayor Shirley Franklin's administration, and a passel of city council members.

Sherman's indefatigable pestering of politicians keeps the question of tax bills center stage. The stakes are critical; after years of declining population, Atlanta has seen an influx of new residents. If this year's crop of tax bills are too steep, Sherman warns, that trend could stop; well-heeled Atlantans might start "voting with their feet" and leave for cheaper pastures. Case in point: The new sewer and water rates have forced Sherman's own condo association to install individual meters rather than simply splitting the tab. And if that doesn't spark a little elevator chitchat, what will?

T I D B I T

In 1981, Atlantans paid **\$985** per capita in taxes and fees. In 2003: **\$1,972.**

—REBECCA BURNS

MAYOR FRANKLIN: SUSAN J. ROSS; SHERMAN: EMMETT MARTIN; COMMISSIONER HANDEL: FULTON COUNTY