

August 11, 2011

[The Times Leader](#)

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Hazleton pediatrician Bassam Bittar came to Wednesday's Luzerne County back-tax sale with his eye on a former law office on busy Route 315 in Plains Township.

The building on 0.82 acres is assessed at \$446,400 for taxation purposes, and Bittar said he made a promise to himself that he would stop bidding at \$100,000.

A heated bidding war pushed the price up to \$77,000 before Bittar prevailed.

The audience congratulated Bittar with applause because the purchase was among the highest in Wednesday's sale, in which bids typically started at \$800 to \$900.

"I'm pleased. That was my main target," he said, pondering whether he will try to resell the property or move his own office into part of the building and rent out the rest.

About 160 properties were sold Wednesday, generating \$1.38 million in revenue for taxing bodies, according to Northeast Revenue Service LLC, the county's tax claim operator.

"We were thrilled. It was the largest turnout I'm aware that we've ever had, and I think that might be the largest net proceeds ever made in a back-tax sale," said Northeast representative Sean Shamany.

Around 300 people packed into the county courthouse jury room for the sale, which ran more than four hours because of the number of bidders.

Many stood because safety codes prevented the building and grounds department from adding more than 250 chairs. In total, 254 people registered to bid.

Wilkes-Barre's Assistant Attorney Bill Vinsko bid \$15,000 in city funds to acquire a vacant commercial building on the corner of South Main and Northampton Streets in Wilkes-Barre. Vinsko's bidding knocked out two other interested buyers. The city previously purchased two other properties in this series of connected buildings, though two more are still privately owned.

The strip faces the Main Street lofts above the downtown theater complex, and city officials hope a developer will mirror that project, Vinsko said.

"We will look to expand the streetscape improvements started with the theater and work with development agencies," he said.

Albert Raiani traveled from Hillsborough, N.J., and bought two properties Wednesday but gave up on a third when the bids exceeded his comfort zone.

Raiani said he purchased his first back-tax property at a county sale in March and has spruced up the West Pittston building to try to sell it.

On Wednesday he purchased a two-family house on Wyoming Avenue in Dupont for \$16,000. The property is assessed at \$78,200. He also successfully bid \$14,000 for a home assessed at \$76,200 on Lehigh Street in Wilkes-Barre Township.

Area native Adam Lowe and his brother-in-law, Loren Truong, flew in from Florida to bid in the sale after learning about the opportunity from a friend. Unlike many of the bidders who had extensively researched prospective buys, Lowe and Truong said they took chances Wednesday

but plan to do their homework next time.

Lowe bid at least \$26,300 to buy seven properties with a combined assessed value of \$322,500. He ran to the assessor's office to obtain photos of his buys and seemed particularly happy with a three-unit apartmentbuilding in Ashley.

"That's a lot of house for \$14,500," Lowe said.

Truong spent more than \$7,300 buying at least five properties with a combined assessment of \$364,100.

Attorney David Schwager purchased a commercial trucking company building on Second Street in Plains Township for \$47,000. It has an assessment of \$229,000.

The roughly 90 properties that didn't sell Wednesday will go into the "repository," a hodgepodge of properties in limbo. Properties may be purchased from the repository at any time if taxing bodies accept an offered price.

John Rodgers, head of Northeast Revenue, said he's working on an online auction to try to stir up interest in the hundreds of repository properties and get more of them back on the tax rolls.

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