

Hills homeowners storm city hall over assessments

(Continued from page 1A)

The board noted the information and promised the Shabens a mailed response within three to four weeks. That's all they could promise anyone. The next step in the review process is a state tax tribunal.

In Farmington Hills, 57.23 mills were levied in 1979: nine by the city, the remainder by the Farmington School District, Oakland Community College, Oakland County and special education. Based on those figures, the Shabens would pay \$2,747.04 in taxes (48 x 57.23). The millage rate for 1980 has not been established.

"I can understand a reasonable increase, but they're pricing people out of the market," said another homeowner.

"I'M AN ATTORNEY and I haven't had a real estate closing in six months. I used to do 30 or 40 a year."

"My house is appraised out of line and the criteria for assessment is wrong," he concluded. The attorney was a small part of the picture.

The board hears eight to 10 appeals an hour and doesn't appear intimidated by fist-pounding or harsh words.

"If we see injustice, we'll change it. But nobody will pull the wool over our eyes," said Robert Beauchamp, board chairman. "Our job is to make sure everyone is treated fairly. The only way to change the system is by legislation."

Board members received a letter from Oakland County tax official Herman Stephens threatening board of review officers with fine or imprisonment for arbitrarily changing assessment rates.

Beauchamp, Jerry Pepple and Harlem Morris, all real estate agents appointed to three-year staggered terms by the mayor, are paid \$15 an hour to hear cases and decide if adjustments are needed.

Some appeals, like a 98-year-old man who lives on a fixed income and arrived with an assessment notice he can't afford, are easily recognized hardship cases.

Those over 65 or on welfare who qualify must pay 3.5 percent of their income in taxes. A \$1,200 state rebate covers the rest of their bill.

But in many cases, like the Shabens, residents simply question the monetary value placed on their home by assessors.

"WHAT WE'RE SEEING is a tax rise holiday for business, industry and commerce and a nightmare for the homeowner," said Richard Headlee in a press conference Friday.

Headlee, who led the successful campaign to pass the Tax Limitation Amendment, lives in Farmington Hills.

While the tax rate for homeowners jumped 20 percent, commercial-industrial property netted an average 8 percent assessment increase this year.

The Headlee Amendment requires property taxes not be increased by an amount greater than the inflation rate indexed by the U.S. Department of Commerce. For 1979 applying to 1980 taxes, that rate was 11.3 percent.

While Headlee argues that residential property tax shouldn't increase by more than 11.3 percent, assessors say home values increase much more rapidly than commercial or industrial property values.

They stay within the 11.3 percent limit by averaging all assessment increases together.

"Everyone seems to think the assessments are unusually high this year," said Mayor Joann Soronen. "Inflation has hit housing in this community."

The city council discussed reducing the 1980 millage rate Monday night.

"We'll make every effort," Mrs. Soronen said.

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