

Oakland's assessment fight heads toward court

By Suzie Rollins Singer
staff writer

By mid-November Oakland County residents should know whether their property tax assessments will decrease 5.99 percent for their December payment to bring their assessments below 50 percent of true market value.

"By Nov. 1 the attorney general's office should submit its briefs to the state Court of Appeals," said Herman Stephens, county equalization manager, "and the court should give us a decision regarding the hike."

THE BATTLE erupted last May when the State Tax Commission recommended that residential property assessments be increased an average of about 6 percent.

For some Oakland residents, the 5.99-percent increase would come on top of an average county equalized increase of about 4 percent, pushing some valuations increase up a total of 9.99 percent or more.

After the State Equalization Board approved the increase, the Oakland County Board of Commissioners challenged the decision in the state Court of Appeals.

The Michigan Constitution directs that property be assessed at 50 percent of true market value.

The county and the state are at odds over how residents should be assessed. "If we raised every residential property by 5.99 percent, like the state is recommending, we'll be over and above 50 percent, and that's unconstitutional," Stephens said when the assessment was imposed.

THE STATE wants to assess each of Michigan's 83 counties on a 30-month market study of housing sale prices. The study covers all of 1979, all of 1980 and the first six months of 1981.

But because of Michigan's slumping economy and depressed housing market, Oakland County has opposed increased valuations based on state guidelines that use either 30 months of property sales or 12 months — the two state-approved methods.

Instead, Oakland used sales in the last three months of 1981 to determine the overall level of valuations. Its factor is 6 percent lower than the state in its 30-month study.

SEVERAL CITIES refused to levy their July taxes on the higher assessment level set by the state, Stephens explained. "Some cities lowered their millage rates before imposing the assessment hikes, so they wouldn't be collecting any additional money from their residents. Others levied it

and put the money in escrow," Stephens said. "If the county wins, the state will have to refund the additional taxes. "If we win, we'll let the Court of Appeals tell us what form the rebate will be in," Stephens said.

Cars claim 20,000 deer each year,

About 10 percent of the estimated 200,000 Michigan deer which will be killed this year won't die from arrows or bullets. They'll be hit by cars, according to Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT).

Michigan motorists are now entering the most dangerous period of the year for deer-car accidents. Last year, 21,242 such accidents were reported, and most occurred during the period from October through December.

The accidents resulted in two human deaths, 1,159 injuries and an estimated \$29.8 million in property damage, or an average of \$980 per accident.

Oakland County had 180 car-deer accidents with seven persons injured. Wayne County had 48 accidents and 10 human injuries.

"That's an expensive way to get a deer," said Joe Vogt, wildlife biologist for the Michigan Department of Natural Resources.

THE ACCIDENTS also took their toll on deer. Wildlife biologists say that nearly all deer involved in accidents with vehicles are killed, although many limp away from the accident scene to die in the woods or fields.

The highest number of deer-car accidents in 1981 occurred in the central portion of the southern half of the Lower Peninsula. Kent County reported 898 accidents, the most in the state, followed by 693 in Calhoun County.

Several factors contribute to the higher number of accidents during late autumn.

Fall is their "rutting," or mating season, which reaches its peak in November and produces increased deer activity.

Deer also tend to congregate in "yards," or low places with dense vegetation, once food supplies become sparse and the weather colder. Many major highways cross directly through deer yards.

Hunting also contributes to increased deer activity in late autumn.

ALTHOUGH THE deer population is down this year from last, there are still about 1.4 million of them out there. To avoid a tragic accident with a deer, the Michigan Department of Transportation offers these tips to drivers:

- Stay alert, and be aware that a deer may leap out in front of your car at any time.

- Deer are most active in the early morning and evening hours. Be particularly wary at these times.

- Deer usually travel in small groups. If you spot one, chances are there will be more in the vicinity.

- When driving in the dark, look for a pair of bright, whitish eyes which appear to be well off the ground. If you spot them, slow down immediately.

- Wear your seat belt and be sure your passengers do the same.

If you kill a deer while driving, you are allowed to keep it, but you must contact the nearest law enforcement office to fill out an accident report.

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