

Property assessments rise in Hills

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property owners received advance warning in December.

For equalization purposes, Babb based assessments on a 24-month sales study. If Babb had used a 12-month sales study, assessments

would have increased much more because in the past year housing sales and prices have been astronomical, he said.

To ease the pain, Babb used sales recorded in Farmington Hills in the last three quarters of 1984, all of 1985 and the first quarter of 1986.

"WE'RE SETTING assessments at an aggregate 50 percent (of market value) of that time. The 12-month would have caused assessments to increase much greater than what we are doing," Babb said.

Housing prices in neighborhoods that have had active markets have increased up to 30 percent. "For the most part, I'm seeing 15-20 percent increases on the average," Babb said.

In 1985 and 1986, residential property assessments increased an average 3 percent. But as he is doing this year, Babb warned that assessments would continue to increase.

If homeowners received an assessment increase it means one of two things. An improvement was made to the house or, when Babb reviewed housing sales in the area, the level of assessments was below 50 percent of the market value.

AN ASSESSMENT, Babb said, is generally 50 percent of the "usual selling price" of a house. Babb uses sales and a house's current assessment to determine if this year's assessment is at 50 percent of the market value.

When setting assessments, Babb said, he tries "to keep in line with the area" and attempts to avoid "reacting to one-year swings in the sales study. We temper everything to what we know is happening in the market."

Commercial and industrial property assessments are not so easily determined and involve a number of factors — income, market sales and costs, Babb said.

While the average increase is 35 percent, many commercial and industrial assessments doubled, some increased 60-80 percent. A 35 percent increase means an assessment of \$1 million increased to \$1.35 million.

BUT THAT'S still the average. Others, in dollars, increased from \$1.5 to \$2.5 million and \$1.2 million to \$2.7 million.

Hardest hit were shopping centers and apartment complexes. Hotels and motels also received significant increases. That's because the value of these properties in nowhere near what it used to be. At one time, office rents and values were far above those of a shopping center. Not any more. And the same holds true for apartments. An example of what one shopping center owner saw on his assessment notice is a change from an assessed value of \$1.6 to \$2.8 million, Babb said.

When comparing the former assessment with the new one, some property owners might be amazed. The numbers shown on the commercial and industrial properties notices aren't indicative of a single year's worth of increased value.

WITH ALL THE growth the city has experienced in recent years, the city assessing staff has been hard pressed to keep up with commercial and industrial property assessments. Though some properties have been increased slightly in the last couple of years, many have not or have not been increased appropriately, Babb said.

When Oakland County officials announced in 1984 that commercial and industrial property in Farmington Hills was underassessed, the city had a choice. It could either accept a factor or have the properties reappraised.

A flat county-applied factor would have been the easiest avenue for boosting assessments up to the 50 percent market level. But that would have meant that some properties would have been assessed at more than 50 percent market value, Babb said.

Instead, the city chose to contract with the county and reappraise approximately 1,350 commercial and industrial properties.

"We have gone to some lengths (to ensure) that the level of assessments we're at is fair with the surrounding areas," Babb said.

How to appeal property tax assessments

Farmington Hills property owners who believe their property tax assessments are too high have a recourse.

Boards of review for residential and commercial and industrial property owners are gearing up for expected appeals.

Both three-member boards — the commercial and industrial property board of review is new — will begin hearing assessment appeals Monday, March 9. Appointments can be made by telephone or in writing beginning Monday, March 2, through 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 11. Appeals will be heard in the Farmington Hills City Council chambers, 31555 11 Mile.

Property owners claiming hardship are asked to appeal assessments in writing. Appointments are unnecessary. A form will be mailed to the

property owner who will be asked to fill it out and mail it back while the boards are in session, Farmington Hills assessor Dean Babb said.

Those who wish to appeal their assessments should provide market evidence showing why their property is not worth what the assessment shows. Or the property owner should show why, when compared to other nearby property, his property is overassessed, Babb said.

The assessment process determines the true cash value of property for the purpose of calculating property taxes. True cash value is the "usual selling price" of property. If property owners think their assessments may be too high, records at the assessor's office in city hall can be checked, according to the Michigan Tax Information Council.

ITEMS TO CHECK when inspecting assessor's records include:

- Accurate recorded dimensions of buildings on the property.
- Accurate representations of the portions of the building or house, such as unfinished attics, that could affect assessments.

When appealing an assessment before a review board, property owners should document their arguments for a lower assessment with "examples of comparable housing sold at lower prices than your appraisal or of sales patterns in your neighborhood," according to the state tax information council.

"Also, your appeal should be limited to questioning the validity of the tax assessment and cannot include any arguments regarding the tax rate," according to the tax information council.

Property owners still unsatisfied with an appeals' results before the local board of review may take their case a step further. Appeals to the Michigan Tax Tribunal must be preceded by appeal at the local level and must be received no later than June 30.

The letter should include the name and address of the property owner, the legal description of the property, the county and city where the property is located. The date of protest to the local review board and a statement of the reason for appeal should be included. There is no fee and the tax tribunal schedules hearings throughout the state.

The tax tribunal can be contacted at (517)373-8550 or in writing to: Michigan Tax Tribunal, Treasury Department, P.O. Box 30250, Lansing, MI 48909.

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