

County establishes taxpayers' affidavit 'hotline'

By PAT MURPHY
Staff Writer

Oakland County is paying a price for efficiency.

It's a modest price, to be sure. And a bit flustering — and an indication that Oakland is on top of a controversy.

"I think it's a little humorous," said Lisa A. Hobart, deputy manager of the county's equalization

department. But it's also compensatory.

The price the county equalization department is paying is handling an increasing number of phone calls from home owners living outside the county. Callers want information about the affidavit homeowners must file by March 1 in order to qualify for the property tax cut in Gov. John Engler's school financing reform.

Oakland this week will begin mailing preprinted affidavits to more than 350,000 home owners. The preprinted affidavits save home owners time, and they assure prompt processing.

Oakland even has a hotline expected to be functional beginning today. The number is 855-1123. Even without the hotline last week, the equalization department was flooded with phone calls, said Hobart. "Many of them were from people in neighboring counties who said they wish they lived in Oakland County," she said, presumably so they could get comparable assistance.

"We don't have to answer those calls, because our priority is Oak-

land residents," she said. "But we do answer them. Some people are really concerned."

At a press conference Wednesday, Executive L. Brooks Patterson outlined the assistance the county is providing. He also predicted a "disaster" as residents scramble to file affidavits by the March 1 deadline, or miss out on the early phase of Michigan's historic change in school financing.

State Rep. John Freeman, D-Madison Heights, is scheduled to introduce a bill this week to move the deadline back by about six weeks to April 15. But as of today, residents have three weeks to file the affidavits ... or pay unnecessary property taxes.

The affidavits — called homestead affidavits — stipulate a specific piece of property is in fact the homestead of the owner who lives there. Failure to file on time will make the property owner subject to property tax rates 100 to 150 percent higher than those charged to home owners who file on time.

Failure to file on time will mean property owners are subject to 24 mills per \$1,000 assessed valuation, rather than the 12 or 6 mills charged to home owners who meet the deadline.

Whether a home owner pays 6 or 12 mills depends on what voters decide March 16 when they

voted on a proposal to raise the state's sales tax from four to six cents.

If voters decided to increase the sales tax, property designated as homesteads will be subject to 6 mills. If the sales tax increase is defeated, then the Michigan income tax automatically increases, and homestead property is subject to the 12 mill rate.

Property not designated as a homestead could be taxed at 24 mills. If voters voted an 18 additional mills under the ballot plan. Under the supplemental plan, local districts could levy up to 12 mills on all property, with certain districts allowed supplemental millage.

Kennedy to speak

Hundreds of Michigan Democrats will gather at the Adat Shalom Synagogue in Farmington Hills on Sunday, Feb. 13, for a chance to meet U.S. Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II.

Kennedy, eldest son of Robert F. and Ethel Kennedy, will deliver the Keynote Address at the 34th Annual Phil Hart Dinner sponsored by the Oakland County Democratic Party.

Dinner co-chairs Jim Shimoura and Cindy Howard said they are delighted the Massachusetts Democrat agreed to speak at the annual fundraising event.

"The Phil Hart Dinner has a tradition of attracting major national figures," said Howard, noting that the list of recent Phil Hart keynote speakers includes Bill Clinton and Al Gore.

Shimoura agrees "Democrats in Oakland County and around the state are learning to keep their calendars clear for Phil Hart each

year, because time and again we've been successful in bringing in exciting speakers and strong national leaders."

Kennedy is in his fourth term representing the 8th Congressional District of Massachusetts — the seat previously held by House Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill and the congressman's uncle, President John F. Kennedy.

"We're hoping for a record turnout at this year's dinner," says Oakland County Democratic Chair Don Tucker. "Not only do we have a great speaker, but our honorees this year are two highly deserving individuals — Sen. Donald W. Reigle and Winifred Fraser."

Dinner tickets may be purchased for \$50 each from the Oakland County Democratic Party. Inquiries should be directed to Democratic Headquarters at 334-0971 or 435-4044.

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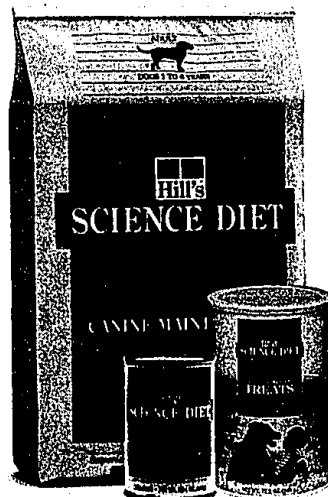
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