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the state equalized value of their homes, since their taxes won't go up more than the rate of inflation. This year, that's 1.9 percent.

While the law creates a great deal more paperwork for his department, the good of it lies in a more manageable review process. Now taxes don't go up in line with value increases until a property is sold.

"Unless there was a transfer of ownership, most people are going to see a less than two percent increase in their taxes depending on the millage rate," Babb said. "But there are some

neighborhoods where assessments are going up double digit." Lower priced homes in the southeast portion of the city will likely see the largest increases in assessed value, he explained. "Starter" homes represent an area undergoing the greatest change.

"It's just a real high demand market, and as everything else goes up in value, those do as well," Babb explained. "Higher priced homes still seem to be doing very well. We haven't seen dramatic swings in price, but we have seen a little slower sales." Assessments are directly

linked to sales, and the assessing staff keeps track of real estate transactions in all of Farmington Hills' nearly 400 neighborhoods. Babb has a record of sales over a period of 24 months, as well as current sales.

The idea is to determine whether trends from the past are continuing or an anomaly, outside the norm. Babb said he uses whichever value works best for the taxpayer.

Though Proposal A has calmed some of the taxing complaints, some homeowners still appear before the Board of Appeals to preserve their rights under the

law. They can't appeal a value to the Michigan Tax Tribunal without taking that first step.

Babb said the city doesn't lose many of those cases.

"The burden of proof shifts to the petitioner," he explained. "We'll do an independent appraisal on the property. If we're wrong, we'll call before the hearing and settle the case. Because we do an independent appraisal, we have strong market data to support our position."

Paper from page A1

Steve Brock hopes to introduce paperless packets for the March 20 council meeting, but achieving that goal could be a challenge.

"It sounds simple, but there's lots of issues that need to be addressed, not the least of which is things like bound documents and site plans," he said. "A lot of things could be scanned in."

He expects putting departmental memos in an electronic format will increase efficiency. Currently, department heads send him documents, and if he makes changes, they're penciled in and then sent back for corrections. When those are sent via e-mail, Brock can correct the document

right on his computer screen, so it'll be immediately ready for distribution.

"I think that's going to save me and the people on the council a lot of time," he said, adding the clerk's office should also realize some time savings in photocopying and collating documents for distribution.

Brock and a few council members have expressed some trepidation about actually using the technology. Instead of paging through a three-ring binder, they'll have to click through pages on a computer screen.

"I'm going to see how it goes from my perspective," Brock said. "I'm no computer maven."

Grant feels that adjustment is simply part of a necessary process that will eventually put Farmington Hills on the cutting edge of technology.

"I think everybody will get into the program," he said confidently. "I think the majority of the council is very much in favor of this."

Issues of security have been addressed, Brock said, in the existing firewalls and virus protection systems already built into the main computers and laptops. Also, the delivery system won't be interactive, so officials won't be sending anything back to City Hall.

Grant also noted the city has a

pretty sophisticated back up system, so that if computers go down, data will be protected. Because departmental reports are composed in Microsoft Word software, they can simply be transferred to a central file and downloaded to officials.

He envisions a day when government will be completely paperless, as technology becomes more sophisticated. "Ultimately, I think that it should be the goal that it's all done electronically," he said.

Brock tends to be a little more cautious about the idea of a totally electronic city hall.

"I hope the day never comes when we're not obligated by law

Schools named contest winner

The Farmington Public Schools has been named a winner in the annual Michigan School Public Relations Association Communications Contest.

The contest was organized by the Michigan School Public Relations Association and was held in the Detroit area.

The award was presented to the Farmington Public Schools by the Michigan School Public Relations Association.

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and Lisa But, communications specialist.

Awards were given for print and electronic communications. More than 100 entries were judged. Early contest finalists included the Farmington Public Schools.

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Power from page A1

ing groundwater from a construction site) and the effects on wells on that street," said Power Road Homeowners Association President Maureen Thiering. "Major efforts should be made to ensure there is no inconvenience to the residents."

The list of protective measures required during construction includes:

n Aligning the sewer in the existing roadway, rather than digging up the side of the road.

n Installing fences on both sides of the road to protect existing vegetation.

n Limiting construction traffic from the south along the existing road, rather than north beyond the end of the construction zone.

n Providing residents with a temporary access through Oakland Community College's Orchard Lake campus.

n Instead of excavating a deep or trench, boring the northern sewer lines in an area where they will have to go deeper due to an existing hill.

n Prohibiting the contractor from storing equipment and materials within the drip line of existing trees.

n Videotaping the road to document its condition before construction, to ensure complete restoration afterward.

n In the event the contractor decides to "de-water" the area, water must be piped south to a natural outlet in the 11 Mile Road system, rather than Power Road.

n Leads from the main lines to homes will be "back dug," so the equipment site on the street and disruption to the adjacent areas is minimized.

Bissell said the project has no initial budget; however, protective measures would undoubtedly add to the cost. Under the consent agreement, the city will participate in an amount capped at \$300,000.

Brock reiterated his commitment to all the promises he's made to homeowners, and also agreed to a suggestion that the city offer residents the opportunity to have the insides of their homes videotaped prior to construction, to document any damage from de-watering or other activity.

Gail Salley was particularly concerned, since her home lies in an area where an increasing number of homes has altered the flow of drainage and groundwater. "Our sump pump runs every three minutes, 365 days a year," she said. "We're sitting on a river. If de-watering takes place and we're sitting on a river, will we be sitting in a sink hole?"

Brock assured her the city would take care of all homes affected. He said specific questions regarding the de-watering process would be answered during meetings with residents held prior to construction.

Resident Irene Kernicky said she had talked to a homeowner who had experienced a sulfur smell to his well water following a de-watering in conjunction with construction at Green Castle. There, residents were given 500-gallon containers of potable water to tide them over through the process.

In addition, she said homeowners in an area where pumps had

drained the excess water experienced problems with their septic systems.

Brock said that project involved a completely different grade of road and stressed any water removed from the site will be piped toward an existing outlet, rather than simply drained off along Power Road.

While they have little choice but to move forward under the consent judgment, city officials assured residents they would do all they could to minimize the impacts. Council member Vicki Barnett said every effort would be made to protect both the residents and the city in this process.

Council member Jerry Ellis took a more practical approach.

"There is no doubt in my mind we will have problems," he said. "Do we have insurance?"

City attorney John Donohue indicated spe-

cific provisions for insurance and other protections would be included in the contracts when they are let out for bid.

While construction could begin as soon as late spring, it is also possible it won't begin at all. Brock said the project developer has to come up with a fairly large amount of cash up front to proceed.

Officials have appointed Department of Public Services employee Gary Zorza to serve as liaison between the city and residents throughout the project.



Holiday Blues?

Does this describe you...

- Hopeless
- Trouble with sleep
- Sad or Blue
- Changes in appetite or weight
- Low energy
- Loss of interest or pleasure

When you're depressed, you often feel worse during the holidays. The Institute For Health Studies is now studying investigational medication for depression in adults 18 and older. All research care is provided at no cost to those who qualify.

Individuals experiencing poorly-controlled medical problems cannot be accepted for research. If you are interested in this research, please call:

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