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Beaufort County still faces backlog of tax appeals

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By ZACH MURDOCK The_Island_Packet

The Beaufort County Assessor's Office will send reassessment notices to property owners the week of Sept. 9.

Owners will have 90 days " until Dec. 11 " to file an appeal with the Assessor's Office.

By ZACH MURDOCK — zmurdock@beaufortgazette.com

As Beaufort County prepares to send out reassessment notices to property owners this month, it is still contending with a backlog of tax-valuation appeals.

The Tax Equalization Board was expanded this spring -- from seven members to 15 -- to hear more appeals, but it has not heard a case in months. Over the summer, the board reorganized and trained its new members. It is now looking to send out hearing notices to property owners in September.

That means the board could start hearings in October, but not before more appeals are filed with the assessor after a countywide reassessment.

The backlog of cases choking the appeals system reached nearly 200 earlier this year, though the Assessor's Office has since been able to chop the backlog to between 140 and 160 cases, according to county assessor Ed Hughes. BOARD HITS SNAGS In March, the overwhelmed tax board suspended hearings indefinitely after losing its administrative assistant at the end of February. At that point, the seven-member volunteer board was able to process only four cases at each of its two meetings each month.

In May, Beaufort County Council voted to expand the board to 15 members. It also changed rules that required the entire board to hear each appeal. Now, three panels, each with five members, can render decisions on appeals. That allows the committee to process 24 cases a month, tripling its previous capacity, board chairman Bob Cummins said.

However, hearings won't resume for another six to eight weeks because the board must hire and train a new administrative assistant, Cummins said.

The board is also required by law to give property owners a 30-day advance notice of their hearings, which sets the first hearings back until mid- to late October, he added. By then, property owners will be well into the filing period for appeals of this year's reassessment.

Notices detailing new assessed values will be mailed to property owners the week of Sept. 9. Owners can challenge the value by filing an appeal with the Assessor's Office from Sept. 12 to Dec. 11.

MAKING SOME HEADWAY

Meanwhile, the Assessor's Office has been working through the backlog to help alleviate the pressure on the board, Hughes said. His staff has been contacting property owners with outstanding appeals to weed out cases in which owners would rather withdraw their appeal than continue to wait to make their case. That has cut about 30 cases from the backlog without having to hold a hearing, Cummins said.

"We're not going to get rid of all of them (that way), we know that," he said. "But it's saving all of us a lot of time and money.

"A smaller caseload combined with an increase in monthly hearings could mean the backlog is nearly gone before reassessment appeals begin, Cummins said.

But Hughes expects another onslaught. "Any time you have a county reassessment, you'll have an increase in appeals," he said.

That's because a property's assessed value is the basis for the amount its owner will pay in taxes, and that value holds until the property is sold or until the next reassessment in five years.

REASSESSMENT AFFECTS BILLS

The Assessor's Office completed its reassessment this month, and property values across the county have dropped, especially in southern Beaufort County, Hughes said.

At current tax rates, a decline in values means less revenue from property taxes, but county and municipal officials are considering or have already adjusted tax rates upward to offset the loss.

Changes to tax rates will affect each property differently, but the owners of property that has retained its value or seen a rise in value will generally pay more in property taxes than in previous years, Hughes said.

On Tuesday, Beaufort City Council voted to increase property tax rates by 4.32 percent, in addition to a roll forward of the rates to account for reassessment. In June, the county approved a full roll-forward tax increase to offset the countywide decline in property values.

Port Royal, Bluffton and Hilton Head Island still have to set their tax rates, which are due to the county auditor by mid-September.

Follow reporter Zach Murdock at twitter.com/IPBG_Zach.

Read more here: <http://www.islandpacket.com/2013/09/01/2661750/beaufort-county-still-faces-backlog.html#storylink=cpy>

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