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Watchdog barks at assessments

County info sessions won't fix 'broken' system: CAP

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Lake County has scheduled several informational meetings and public one-on-one sessions to help residents understand residential property assessments and the appeal process.

A local assessment watchdog group remains unimpressed, however.

"The problem is the system itself is broken. They haven't changed anything with the assessment process," said Steve Minsky, a spokesman for the Grays-lake-based Citizens' Action Project (CAP). "You can help a person all you want, but it won't make a difference with the assessments."

Minsky also suggested that the meetings and taxpayer assistance programs may be designed to "circumvent" the appeals process by confusing taxpayers or assuring them that assessments are sound to discourage appeals.

County Administrator Barry Burton said county officials are working with township assessors and the Board of Review in an attempt to stress "consistency and transparency."

He said that the county has provided "the most modern technology in which to appraise property," but added that township assessors have their own individual methods as well.

Now that assessment blue cards have been sent out, the meetings are intended to explain the assessment process and provide resources for those who want to appeal an assessment, Burton said.

Burton said features have also been added to the Chief County Assessor's Web page to help with appeals, including a process to view similar properties that homeowners can use to help prepare an appeal.

CAP has stressed a need for consistency from township to township, and has asked the County Board to review the local assessment process.

The group also recommends a statewide review of the assessment process and possible state legislation to eliminate "rogue" assessment practices.

Minsky said he believes such legislation will be initiated soon.

County Board member Larry Leafblad, a frequent critic of the assessment process, said he believes some progress is being made at the county level now that officials have brought the Board of Review into discussions.

Leafblad said the meetings may be useful to home-owners.

"It might result in a better appeal if they can understand what's happened to them," he said.