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Group calls for change in tax assessments

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By **DIANA NEWTON** Staff Writer

Bill Pogson felt "nauseated" and "helpless" when his tax bill arrived at his Grayslake home last year.

"My taxes jumped 33 and a third percent," Pogson said. "My bill went from \$8,600 to \$11,500."

The dramatic jump in his tax bill -- and no clear understanding about why it happened -- spurred Pogson to join Citizens' Action Project.

The new non-profit group is calling on the Lake County Board and state legislature to review the assessment process. The group contends Lake County's assessment process is seriously impaired.

Property assessments determine tax bills, but assessors do not provide consistent explanations about how they determine assessments, the group charges.

John Wasik, of Grayslake, said assessors do not include enough properties to make assessments statistically accurate.

"It's like finding one burglar in the neighborhood and then saying everyone is a burglar," he said. "The little blue card (the tax assessment) is one of the most mystifying and frightening documents from Lake County."

The citizens' group originated in Grayslake, but represents all Lake County home owners, said Thor Madsen, a spokesman.

"We want more accountability and transparency, which we think will lead to fairness and uniformity," Madsen said.

Grayslake has notoriously high real estate taxes, but that is not the issue, Madsen said.

"Everyone pays high taxes," Madsen said. "We said, let's look at how assessments are done."

The group contends the assessment process results in inaccurate assessment, lack of due process and uneven treatment of similar properties.

The group also criticized the appeal process, calling it intimidating and dehumanizing.

"We saw people walking out of the appeal room in a cold sweat," Madsen said. "Even people who won their appeal had nothing positive to say about the experience." "We were summarily dismissed after 15 minutes, and they don't have to give a reason," Wasik said.

Residents in Grayslake's Prairie Crossing subdivision were hit with 20 to 50 percent increases in their tax bills last year, Madsen said.

"That brought a major reaction from everyone," Madsen said.

About 100 Grayslake residents met with Martin Paulson, the chief county assessment officer for Lake County.

Residents weren't satisfied following that meeting and formed the Citizens' Action Project in January. The group is seeking non-profit status and is organizing a Board of Directors.

Paulson was out of the office this week and unavailable for comment. Rick Dishman, assessor for Avon Township, which includes Grayslake, could not be reached.

Citizens' Action Project held a press conference Tuesday to present a 51-page white paper inquiry into real estate assessment practices.

Attorneys, computer consultants and data analysts worked on the paper.

"When I read their research, I got chills," said County Board member Larry Leafblad, who has fought for assessment reform for years. "This could be the blueprint for an overhaul of the Illinois tax code."

"I want to thank you for your hard work," said Board Member Terese Douglass, representing Grayslake. "This is

a process that is just beginning."

"We hear from people every cycle, and it's a fever pitch now," said Board Member Randy Whitmore, representing Wadsworth. "I have two neighbors moving out of Lake County because they can't afford the taxes."

Dick Hosteny has only lived in Grayslake a year so he has not experienced the tax woes of his neighbors. But he joined the group anyway.

"It's just the outrageousness of it all, the lack of transparency about what goes on and the experiences of the people who have to appeal," Hosteny said.

For more information or to read the group's white paper inquiry, visit www.citizensactionproject.org.

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