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Citizens group advocates appealing assessments

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Mark Biersdorf is frustrated by rising property taxes on his Grayslake home, but instead of complaining, he's doing something about it.

For the past three years, he said the assessment on his home in the Prairie Crossing subdivision has increased between 5 and 10 percent a year. His taxes were slated to go up another \$900 next year because of assessment increases.

Biersdorf decided to appeal his assessment to the Lake County Board of Review and was successful in reducing his tax burden by \$600.

"If you don't like your taxes, don't complain about it, do something about it," said Biersdorf, speaking to a standing-room only crowd Tuesday night at a meeting on property assessments held at the Byron Colby Barn in Grayslake.

The meeting was organized by the Citizens Action Project, a non-profit group concerned about rising property assessments and inequities in the assessment process in Lake County.

Organizers say the meeting was designed to empower homeowners by giving them practical information on the steps they can take to appeal their assessments, if they feel their properties have been inaccurately valued. The group also is pushing for state legislation to improve equity and fairness in the assessment process.

"Since the system seems to be stacked against the homeowners, we want to open the process up and make it more transparent," said John Wasik of Grayslake, president of the Citizens Action Project.

Biersdorf discussed the steps residents can take to appeal their assessment. He said they typically have 30 days to file an appeal with the Lake County Board of Review once they have received their assessment notice in the mail. Homeowners who fail at the county level can also appeal to a State of Illinois Property Tax Appeal Board or seek legal action in the courts.

When making an appeal to the Lake County Board of Review, Biersdorf said homeowners should not focus on what they pay in property taxes, but rather why they feel their property is being unfairly assessed.

He said homeowners can obtain information about similar priced properties in their neighborhoods from the Lake County assessor's office, which can provide valuable documentation when appealing an assessment. In his case, he even obtained a private appraisal on his property to show the assessed amount was higher than the actual value.

Grayslake resident Dave Caddell, who lives in the Fremont Township portion of Prairie Crossing, said it's difficult and costly for homeowners to appeal their assessment every year, and he believes the problems in the assessment process need to be addressed on a more systematic basis.

Because of high assessments, Caddell estimates his tax bill next year will exceed \$13,000.

"There's a much bigger picture here," he said. "These taxes are insane."

Thor Madsen, a spokesman for the Citizens Action Project, said their group believes the entire assessment process needs an overhaul, but also wants to help individual homeowners on steps they can take individually.

"We're looking at the big picture too," he said. "We're looking at (statewide) legislation. We're looking at making a change to the way assessments are done by bringing transparency and accountability to that process."

Several state and county officials attended the meeting, including State Rep. Ed Sullivan Jr., R-51st, of Mundelein, and State Rep. Sandy Cole, R-62nd, of Grayslake, Sen. Michael Bond, D-31st, of Grayslake, and County Board member Therese Douglass, R-11th, of Grayslake.

Sullivan, who is also Fremont Township assessor, said he agreed with the group that assessment procedures can vary considerably between

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townships, and he supports legislation to bring greater consistency to the process.

"I have met with the CAP group and pledged to work with them on any potential legislation they come up with, along with Sen. (Michael) Bond," he said. "I agree the assessment process needs much more transparency, and as an assessor and a state representative, my goal has always been to have better standardization of assessment practices."

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