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Appeals board lowers value of lots

PVA boss stands by assessments

By Andrea Uhde

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The board that handles appeals for Oldham property assessments reduced the assessed value of about 300 vacant lots -- most of them owned by developers or builders -- by 25 percent this year.

The three-member board also slashed 60 percent off the value of a vacant 12-acre commercial property in southwestern Oldham and lowered the assessed value of a lot on Rose Island Road by 44 percent.

Oldham Property Valuation Administrator Ron Winters, whose office set the original assessments, is appealing the changes to the state Board of Tax Appeals, which will weigh arguments from Winters and the property owners.

Winters called the changes by the local appeals board arbitrary, and he said his office's original assessments were so accurate "it was scary."

But board members and the property owners say Winters' assessments were off, especially when factors including the economy are considered.

Each year, the PVA office reassesses the values of properties in one section of the county. The assessments are used to calculate property taxes. People who feel their assessments are incorrect can take their concerns to the PVA office, and if no compromise is reached, they can go before the appeals board, Winters said.

Winters and his employees used the sales prices of similar properties in the area to help place values on the vacant lots, which Winters says is proper procedure under state law.

"The sales of the lots justified our assessments," he said.

Developer Bob Jones, who appealed many of his properties, said that's an unfair comparison because the best lots are the ones that sell first. He owns the 12-acre lot in southwestern Oldham and said it has a gully, and sewers aren't available to it.

"All lots are not created equal," Jones said. "Some are smaller; some are rougher to build on."

Plus, vacant lots don't require schools, police or fire services, he said.

Winters, however, said his office considers that all lots aren't the same and made sure to use sales prices on comparable lots for assessments.

"We don't put one value on every lot in the subdivision," he said.

Joe Pusateri of Elite Homes, who appealed the assessments on 52 vacant lots in the Reserve at L'Esprit, said Winters should consider the number of available lots in the area.

"You have to look at what someone would pay to buy all 52," Pusateri said. "It will take us years to sell those lots."

Winters, however, said he is supposed to consider sales prices for comparable lots under the law.

The assessment appeals board meets once a year. This year's board members were broker Tom Cox, appraiser Rusty Davis and Herb Head, who works with commercial real estate. Two members are appointed by the county, and one by La Grange, Cox said.

This year, the board also considered appeals on assessments for several homes. On most of those, the board kept the assessed value or decreased it.

Board members also considered appeals on several lots owned by individuals, which they decreased up to 33 percent. One assessment was kept the same, and another for three adjacent lots was doubled.

Lowry Watkins Jr., who owns those three lots, said he is appealing that decision with the state. Cox said the board's decision was due to the lots being a useable piece of property, but Watkins says it's more like a "little grand canyon."

Cox said people must present proof, such as pictures and handouts, to challenge assessments.

He said they chose to cut assessments on many of the properties by 25 percent, though some could be worth even less. He added that several subdivisions didn't have any sales in 2007 to compare them to.

When asked if he felt the board had been kinder to developers -- something that at least one resident has said -- Cox adamantly disagreed.

"We played no favoritism to nobody," he said.

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