

Task force will try to improve tax appraisals

By ANNA M. TINSLEY
STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER

DALLAS — Tired of rising property values that boost tax bills even if local tax rates don't go up?

Somebody out there is ready to listen.

Gov. Rick Perry on Monday created a 15-member task force to study "skyrocketing" property appraisals, hold public meetings statewide and turn in a report and recommendations to improve the tax-appraisal process in time for the Legislature to consider next year.

"Texans have been besieged by skyrocketing appraisal values that in many cases exceed population growth and inflation," said Perry, a Republican who is running for re-election. "I believe in local control. But I also believe if people are going to pay more in taxes to local government, it ought to come because of a vote and not the appraiser's note.

"The fact is, I think there's been a wink and a nod for years of when local folks needed some money," he said. "Rather than having to raise tax rates, just raise appraisals."

Perry said he wants Texans to give their opinions and suggestions to the task force by Sept. 15, when hearings will start. The task force, which will be headed by Tom Pauken, a former Texas Republican Party chairman and Reagan administration official, has set up a toll-free telephone number and is accepting written comments.

Fort Worth City Councilman Chuck Silcox has long wanted city leaders to try to reduce the local tax rate because, he said, some people are being priced out of their homes by rising tax bills.

Even though city officials hope to hold the line this year on the tax rate — 86.5 cents per \$100 of assessed property value — rising valuations drive up tax bills.

"Local governments aren't trying to cut back," Silcox said. "Most people get tired of hearing elected officials say they're not raising the tax rate, but their taxes are going up anyway."

In Tarrant County, appraised values grew by 9 percent this year, with about half the growth because of construction.

In Fort Worth, the taxable value grew by 14 percent, according to Tarrant Appraisal District records.

The values are based on home size, style, quality and comparable sales in the neighborhood, said John Marshall, TAD's chief appraiser.

"I'm sorry, there's no wink and nod here," Marshall said. "I've not had a tax unit call me and say they needed more values and please do something about it."

The Texas Task Force on Appraisal Reform is geared to go hand in hand with a school-financing package that lawmakers approved this year and that is to save homeowners and businesses \$15.7 billion on school property taxes over the next three years.

Perry previously asked legislators to cap annual property appraisals. He now said he wants the task force to come to make its own decision.

"I have asked them to put everything on the table, no sacred cows and no prearranged conclusions," Perry said.

Pauken said he will do his best to address what many call a "stealth tax — a hidden tax as a result of rising property values."

"Our appraisal system in Texas is broken and badly in need of fixing," he said.

North Texans appointed to the committee include Brooke Leslie Rollins of Fort Worth, president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation and a former attorney on Perry's staff; Calvin Stephens of Dallas, president of SSP Consulting; and L. Curtis Culwell of Garland, superintendent of the Garland school district.

Perry is running for re-election against Democrat Chris Bell, independents Carole Keeton Strayhorn and Kinky Friedman and Libertarian James Werner.

Got ideas?

Gov. Rick Perry is asking for "reform proposals" regarding property appraisals by Sept. 15, when the task force will start holding hearings statewide. To comment, call toll-free 888-892-7772, go to www.governor.state.tx.us or write the Texas Task Force on Appraisal Reform, P.O. Box 12428, Austin, TX 78711.

Anna M. Tinsley, 817-390-7610
atinsley@star-telegram.com