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Local News

Committee hears about tax bite

By Enrique Rangel | A-J AUSTIN BUREAU

Wednesday, June 18, 2008

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AUSTIN - State Rep. Debbie Riddle's 85-year-old mother has lived in the same house for 35 years.

But she wanted to move out because she feared for her safety and wanted to be near Riddle and her family.

Though her property tax was frozen because she is a senior citizen, buying a new home meant paying a higher property tax she could not afford. So, the only way she could move out was if Riddle and her husband could pay the high property tax, which they agreed to do.

Riddle's story was one of many the recently created state House Committee on Property Tax Relief and Appraisal Reform Select heard Tuesday during a five-and-a-half-hour public hearing - mainly from the panel members themselves.

Property tax appraisal caps are expected to be top priority in next year's session, but lawmakers agree there is no guarantee there will be any legislation passed - most reform measures considered last year went nowhere, even though it was a priority for Gov. Rick Perry.

Rising appraisals and increasing property taxes are a problem everywhere in Texas, said Patrick Brown, a former Lubbock County tax appraiser and now chief appraiser at the Travis County Appraisal District in Austin.

"I heard that when I was in Lubbock, too," Brown told the panel.

And it was precisely because everyone on the panel had a similar story that they put Brown and nine other invited witnesses on the hot seat.

"These are real people, but I am not hearing any answers," said Riddle, who is not a committee member but sat in on the hearing because it is a courtesy in the Legislature to invite fellow lawmakers to sit on the panel if there is an empty seat. Four of the 13 members, including Rep. Joe Heflin, D-Crosbyton, were not at the hearing, the first meeting the committee has held since House Speaker Tom Craddick created it in April.

Riddle, who sits on the House Appropriations Committee, was particularly incensed at suggestions that if people have difficulty paying their property taxes, they should take a home equity loan or get a reverse mortgage if they qualify for it.

And no one felt the wrath of Riddle and other lawmakers more than Buddy Breivogel, manager of the Property Tax Division at the Office of the State Comptroller.

"I need to know how you are getting these numbers," a visibly frustrated Rep. Gary Elkins, R-Houston, said to Breivogel about double-digit appraisal increases his constituents are complaining about. "People need to hire lawyers" to fight those increases.

Rep. John Otto, R-Dayton, the panel's chairman, was even more specific. He wanted to know what software or methodology appraisers use to evaluate the value of a property - he owns a 25-year-old commercial building whose tax bill went up 40 percent last year.

"What an appraiser normally would be doing is appraising the property as whatever it would cost to replace a property," Breivogel answered. "They would consider not only physical depreciation but also economic depreciation and other factors that go into actually arriving at a market value."

Former Rep. Talmadge Heflin, R-Houston, who chaired the House Appropriations Committee during the 78th Legislature in 2003, said the Legislature is doing the right thing by holding these hearings because homeowners everywhere are upset by rapidly rising appraisals.

"I still hear complaints about property taxes, and I am not a representative," said Talmadge Heflin, who was defeated in the 2004 election. "This is something that people are really mad about."

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Posted by: [running4district1](#) at Jun 18, 2008 at 03:32:31 PM

Why is it that old people don't have to pay their fair share? If retired people kicked in their fair share everyones taxes would be lower! This is why we need a state income tax. People pay according to income and the homeowners between 20-64 don't have to pay the taxes for the other 60% of the people who are retired or do not own a home.

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