

Groups form to discuss reform of property taxes

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CODY - Despite relatively low property tax rates compared with most other states, some Wyoming homeowners say that sharply rising real estate values and a lack of market transparency are putting a big pinch on taxpayers.

"Most people don't understand that right now in Wyoming, they're being effectively denied due process, because county assessors operate behind a smoke screen, and there's no way to pin them down," said Bill Doenz.

Doenz has helped organize Taxpayer Advocates for Sheridan County, a group that meets monthly to discuss property tax reform.

He has helped set up a similar group in Johnson County and has been working with Park County residents to start a group there. He is also planning chapters in Teton, Fremont and Sublette counties.

Privacy laws criticized

Doenz takes issue with privacy laws in Wyoming that don't allow homeowners to review the sale prices of all the homes in a particular subdivision when appealing a property assessment.

After signing a confidentiality agreement, taxpayers may review the comparable properties, or "comps," of the handful of homes used to reach an assessment, but state law generally keeps confidential the details of real estate transactions.

"If there's a disagreement, both sides ought to have a right to the same information, but the homeowner is not given all the information the assessor had to analyze," Doenz said. He seeks to change state laws governing disclosure of property sales.

"My campaign is an informational campaign to network counties and put pressure on legislators, and if the legislators will not move, the next option is a ballot initiative," he said.

"Wyoming's assessors have for years taken the stance that we want to have open disclosure, but we get fought on that at the Legislature," said Doug "Rip" Brandt, Park County assessor.

"I'm all for it, and it would take a lot of the heat off of (assessors)," he said.

Most taxpayers don't seek a special hearing to dispute assessments, Brandt said, so the issue of access to home values is seldom raised. In Park County in each of the last few years, only two or three taxpayers have sought such hearings.

"If you've really got an issue, we'll work to resolve everything we can and still be uniform and equal for everybody," Brandt said.

Homeowners may correct bad information about a home's size, offer real estate listings showing similar homes unsold at lower values or offer recent appraisals as ways to get an assessor to reconsider a value, he said.

Prices continue climb

Though real estate markets have cooled slightly and home prices have climbed less this year than the year before, some areas remain desirable and continue to see rising home prices, which means larger property tax bills, he said.

In Park County, residents in fast-selling areas like the North Fork and South Fork of the Shoshone River are more likely to see higher rate increases than in older, more stable neighborhoods where homes aren't changing hands as quickly, Brandt said.

South Fork resident John Torbit said his recent property tax notice showed a 12 percent increase from last year.

"The taxes are just getting out of hand in this area," said Torbit, who works part time as a pharmacist.

"At this rate, my property taxes will double in the next six or seven years," he said. "It's just a matter of time until I'm taxed out of my house."

Torbit has been coordinating with Doenz and others to build support for a ballot initiative that would change the state constitution to cap annual property tax increases.

"That way, it's predictable, so you can see how much the tax is going to be each year," he said, adding that many on fixed incomes are unable to absorb large tax increases.