

# EVANSTON REVIEW

June 23, 2005

## OPINION

Thursday, June 23, 2005

### Reform needed in tax field

**Highland Park/Bob**

Seidenberg's article "Mailing prompt assessor advice" June 9, 2005 was a much needed report in the field of property tax appeals. As the principal of a property tax company, I want to express our shared concern about solicitations and representations made for tax appeals that appear to be official county businesses, or that are misleading or confusing to tax payers.

Our organization refrains from such tactics and does assist seniors and other property owners to submit appeals "pro se." This method is the most successful way for homeowners to obtain tax relief. We never charge a "filing fee."

We have advocated for across-the-board standards that should apply to lawyers and consultants who work in the tax assessment field. We believe that all appeal practitioners should be certified, as is done in other states, and have called for the end of contributions made by practitioners to elected officials who preside over tax appeal cases.

Too often the real estate tax appeal system is steeped in politics and clout. The encouraging news is that more taxpayers are filing tax appeals independent of tax services and overcoming the perception that

tax services are an exclusive domain of lawyers or tax practitioners.

In Cook County, attorneys often have managed to transform real estate appraisal and accounting practices; fundamental skills used in evaluating and developing property values, into high-priced "legal practice."

The property tax appeal system must be structured fairly with well-defined rules. If not, the public confidence in the tax system breaks down. Appeals expertise should not be shrouded in legalistic jargon or shaded by politics. Tax appeal rules should be standard and accessible so taxpayers can fight for themselves.

Unfortunately, while property tax appeal services are routine big-ticket cost to large property owners, the same services for senior or small homeowners are frequently not affordable. In the end, lawyers and other tax practitioners benefit from the complexity of the current system—at a high cost to taxpayers and assessment administrators.

Our organization regrets practices that reflect poorly on property tax assessment professionals. We hope that questionable practices by a few should not impugn the reputations of the greater majority.

As a long time taxpayer advocate I have worked for reform in Springfield and Chicago that would reduce the need for tax appeals, as well as, taking a role in defeating legislation to restrain the

jurisdiction and powers of the Illinois Property Tax Appeals Board, which has proven to be the leanest and most effective agency in the tax appeal system.

Unethical profiteering from tax appeals should be exposed but we should not be distracted from the most important related issue—reforming one of the biggest, most complex, error prone and non-uniform tax systems in the country. As co-author of the study "Taxation Without Representation—The Illinois Property Tax System," sponsored by the Illinois Taxpayers Federation, and as a former member of the Cook County Board of Review, I know first hand the property tax problems we face as a county and state.

The Illinois revenue system has become a gigantic, complex beast without a master. That is why I encourage taxpayers to vote for an Illinois Constitutional Convention in 2007 to address these serious issues, because we can't depend on meaningful property tax reform from our lawmakers.

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## LETTERS