

## Time to fight to abolish unfair property taxes

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Property taxes are unfair. Taxpayers don't understand their bills. And that's not likely to change.

It is amazing to me, in this era of Tea Party rebellions, that no organized campaign has been launched to abolish property taxes in Illinois. The idea would certainly be popular with voters. Last week, thousands could be found standing in lines at the assessor's offices in Cook County as second installment tax bills arrived in the mail. Most were seniors wondering how they had lost their senior citizen exemption, a property tax break that can be worth hundreds of dollars.

Others just couldn't understand how their property taxes could have increased when their property values had gone down.

There have been many newspaper stories, editorials and columns written about the complicated calculations that produce property tax bills, but people never seem to comprehend it all.

I don't blame them. The system isn't designed to be understood.

Here, for example, is a statement from the Illinois Department of Revenue about the equalization factor the state applies to Cook County property tax bills.

“If the median level of assessment for all property in the county varies from the 33.3 percent level required by law, an equalization factor is assigned to bring assessments to the legally mandated level.”

According to the Department of Revenue the three-year average level of assessments for Cook County property was 10.10 percent, not 33.3 percent.

“The department calculated the multiplier to bring the average level of assessments to the required 33.3 percent level by dividing Cook County's three year average of 10.10 into 33.33.”

In other words, the state determined that the county's assessments were undervalued by a factor of three. But the “equalization factor does not cause individual tax bills to go up,” the Department of Revenue statement continued. “Local taxing bodies determine tax bills when the request dollars needed to provide services to citizens. The assessment process simply determines how the bill will be divided among taxpayers.”

Got that?

Unlike income taxes or sales taxes, property taxes are not based on the ability of people to pay, or willingness to spend.

The average homeowner can only access his property wealth by selling his home. Even in the best of times, that is not something most people are willing to do. In this economy, even people who want to sell their homes can't do it.

And then there's the fact that anyone who sells his home would have to find another place to live, meaning most, if not all, of the money from a home sale is used to purchase another house.

You won't get much of an argument from politicians if you tell them property taxes are unfair. And few would even debate the point that the calculations for property taxes in Cook County are baffling to taxpayers.

The problem in Cook County was complicated further this year when the state Legislature required people to refile for the senior citizens exemption.

Some folks claimed they never got the required forms in the mail, others said they returned them and still didn't get the exemption.

But the problem is really with the property tax system itself.

Taxes ought to be based on a person's ability to pay. The system ought to be comprehensible to the people who are taxed. Property taxes fail on both counts.