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Santa Clara County officials warn consumers about property tax letters

By Cody Kraatz
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A Los Angeles company has been sending out letters that some call misleading, offering to help homeowners reduce the assessed value of their properties, which also reduces their property taxes.

In its letters—which have been sent out all over the state—Property Tax Reassessment quotes a \$179 fee for that service, plus a \$30 late fee if it's not paid by Feb. 26.

The thing is, you can get that for free.

As property values fall, Santa Clara County Assessor Larry Stone's office has automatically started a review of 200,000 properties in February to see if they are eligible for lower assessments. David Ginsborg, deputy to the assessor, said that the office has already reduced 42,000 properties proactively and would likely reduce another 100,000.

In a statement, Stone called the letters "outrageous."

"Property owners most likely eligible for an automatic reduction in their property's assessed value are being inundated by these questionable operators who are feeding upon the increased fears of homeowners stressed by a declining real estate market and the loss of equity," he said.

Property Tax Reassessment did not respond to

requests for comment.

Ginsborg said in mid-February that his office had fielded more than 200 calls wondering what to do with the letter. He said the key question property owners should ask is: "Is my home worth less today than what I paid for it?"

The county will send out notifications of assessed values at the end of June — long after the Los Angeles reassessment company's deadline — after proactively reassessing those properties it thought qualified. Clearly, property owners would not be able to determine before June whether they even need to request a reduction. If owners still think their home is worth less than that value, they can request a reduction under Proposition 8 rules by submitting a one-page form — for free — at www.sccassessor.org/prop8 by Aug. 15.

Last year 8,000 people did that and half got a reduction, Ginsborg said, adding, "we're responsive. This is all part of our customer service."

If property owners do not get the reduction they want they can file a formal assessment appeal by Sept. 15 and go through administrative hearings. They need to have evidence such as home sales from their neighborhood.

Two-thirds of appeals are withdrawn, Ginsborg said. He added that the letters appear to target seniors, many of whom aren't going to get a reduction because they bought their homes before Proposition 13 kicked in and their assessed values are very low.

He said Stone had reported these concerns to the county District Attorney's office. Visit www.sccassessor.org/prop8 . or call 408.299.5500 for more information.

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