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Information is Key to Resolve Assessment Appeals

On July 1, my Office completed the 2016 Assessment Roll, with \$123 billion of assessed values for a diverse workload of about 300,000 properties including business equipment, boats, aircraft, residential, commercial, industrial, agricultural, oil and mineral producing land. One thing these properties all have in common is they each have their own unique characteristics and information necessary for an accurate assessment. The Ventura County Assessor's office strives for good public service and the most accurate assessments that our information indicates.

With the December 10th deadline to pay the first installment on Property Taxes fast approaching, many people are reviewing their bills. In a County Ventura's size, each year thousands of property owners have important questions about the Assessor's process and results, and many believe a correction is warranted. The purpose of this letter is to provide a brief background on how to successfully and efficiently resolve most assessment disagreements.

With the Assessor's annual notices of assessment, which precedes by three months the mailing of tax bills, comes information for property owners on contacting my office for an informal review of the assessed value. In an informal review, a staff appraiser will explain how we calculated the assessed value and share the market and property information we relied upon with the property owner. We complete thousands of these reviews every year. We have found that for all parties, the key to a satisfactory review is the exchange of information. Occasionally, during the informal review the owner may provide the Assessor new information that gives confirming evidence for a fast agreeable change to the assessment.

Other times, the review may indicate the need for a more extensive analysis and additional information required to substantiate changing the assessment. However, sometimes the owner may still have a difference of opinion with the Assessor's analysis. In these cases, we advise the owner to file a formal Assessment Appeal Application with the Assessment Appeals Board. Filing the formal appeal protects owner's right to bring the question of the assessed value before an independent board appointed by the Board of Supervisors. With the improvement in the real estate market, the number of appeals filed during the last five years declined from 5,368 in 2011 to 1,162 filed in 2016.

The Clerk of the Board takes assessment appeals applications up to September 15, and once accepted, provides a copy to the Assessor. State law requires resolution of Applications within two years, with most counties running up to that deadline. We are fortunate that in Ventura County, most cases are resolved on average within ten months. Staff appraisers review the case, contact the owner, exchange information and in 95% of the cases have a satisfactory resolution for a settlement recommendation or by withdrawal. In 2014, the 2,400 formal appeals were pared down to only 40 cases where there was a fair difference of opinion requiring a formal hearing before the Appeals Board.

The Assessor is now working on the 2016 formal appeal review process by sending information request letters to the property owner and providing the owner the information in the Assessor's file. The appraisal process is driven by information; this includes property characteristics, zoning, physical condition, as well as market data analysis of sales of similar properties, income and expense information, depreciation factors and others. The accuracy of an appraisal and the quick turnaround of an appeal application are directly related to the updated information available for consideration in the review analysis.

Unfortunately, a small number of property owners and their representatives attempt to gain advantage by obfuscation in this information gathering process. However, the record shows that in most cases resolved promptly and without formal hearings, the cooperative exchange of information was the key. We appreciate the cooperation of owners, from residential to our largest commercial taxpayers, who understand that working with the Assessor and sharing relevant information leads to the accurate assessment and a more timely resolution that is fair and satisfactory to all parties.