
NEWS



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MISLEADING MAILERS OFFER
LOWER PROPERTY TAXES FOR HOMEOWNERS

Los Angeles County Assessor Rick Auerbach and County Consumer Affairs Director Pastor Herrera, Jr. today warned homeowners to be wary of solicitations from private companies offering to file property assessment reduction forms for a hefty fee to pay for a review by the Assessor's Department for free.

"We are again receiving calls from homeowners who have been sent these deceptive mailers, many of which could be mistaken for government notices and mislead property owners into thinking they must pay at least \$100 to apply for a review of their assessed value," Auerbach said. "Because of the real estate market downturn, however, my office will begin reviewing nearly 500,000 residential properties for their 2009 assessed values.

"We don't charge a fee for this," he said, "and anyone whose homes are reviewed will receive a letter in June notifying them of the results."

One firm, he noted, is charging \$179 to file a decline-in-value application, as well as a so-called "late fee" of \$30. This company is already the subject of investigation in several counties, he added.

"What is particularly disturbing about the latest solicitation from this firm is that it misleads the homeowner by mixing up years. The mailer states that the firm will represent the homeowner in an assessment appeal, when in fact, the last date to appeal was November 30th. If the solicitation is for 2009, assessments have not yet been made. Therefore, this firm won't know what the 2009 assessed value is until after our review of the 500,000 homes is completed in June and the homeowner is notified."

“At best,” Auerbach added, “these are legal but sophisticated scams taking advantage of homeowners who don’t understand that my office will do a reassessment on its own. Or anyone can file a simple application form available on our website at www.assessor.lacounty.gov. This can be completed in a few minutes. The form suggests including comparable sales if known, but that section can be left blank and we will still do the review. A property owner can also call toll-free (888) 807-2111 for assistance.

“At worst, these private solicitations may even violate laws which require very specific language and disclaimers that they are not being sent by a government agency,” he said.

“The 2008 decline-in-value review recently completed by my office,” he said, “resulted in lower assessments on nearly 130,000 homes and condos with an average property tax savings of \$750. At least 1,600 of the reviews we initiated involved unnecessary forms submitted by these private companies at great expense to the homeowner,” Auerbach said.

“Anyone,” Herrera stressed, “who wants a complaint history of these solicitation companies or wants to file a complaint may contact our department at (800) 973-3370. A complaint form is also available on our website at www.dca.lacounty.gov/contact.htm. If someone has already paid for this unnecessary service, they may be eligible for a refund, particularly those homeowners who thought they were dealing with a government agency.”

Auerbach added that for 2009 his staff will now look at all homes sold in 2003 or later and may even go back to 2002 in some areas of the county based on a review of market conditions. While anyone has the right to file a decline-in-value application requesting a review of their property’s value, Auerbach urged those who bought their home or condo in 2002 or later to wait until June when the results of the review will be mailed. If a letter is not received or the owner is not satisfied with the results of the review, a decline-in-value application can be submitted.