

Tax-hike ballots in error, assessors say

Suburban questions follow law, but fail to reflect actual increases, group contends

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As many as 10 referendum ballot questions affecting school, park and fire districts in suburban Cook County don't accurately reflect how much property tax bills would increase if the measures pass in next month's election, officials say.

In some cases, the ballot underestimates the increase by as much as 70 percent, said Ali EISaffar, president of the Cook County Township Assessors Association.

"For the taxpayers, our concern is whether they are getting good information or bad information," EISaffar said. "These numbers are too low. It's bad."

As a result, the already complicated ballot questions will leave voters with the impression they'll have more money in their pockets if they support the tax increase, said EISaffar, whose group first noticed the problem late last week after a taxpayer approached them about the issue.

But with barely two weeks until the April 5 election, it's too late to reprint the ballots.

The issue affects districts ranging from Wilmette Public Schools District 39 and Riverside-Brookfield High School Township District 208 to the Olympia Fields Park District and Palos Fire Protection District.

As part of writing their ballot questions, the local districts are required to determine how much tax bills would increase per \$100,000 of assessed value if the referendum measures were to pass.

At least three of the 10 districts hired the Chicago law firm Chapman and Cutler to calculate that number and compose the ballot question.

In its calculations, the firm did not include the state's so-called equalizer, or multiplier, a factor applied to Cook County assessments each year to ensure they match up to assessments in other areas of the state, EISaffar said.

By not including that factor, he said, the ballot questions estimated tax increases that were much lower than what taxpayers would experience should a referendum measure pass.

Ballot vs. tax bill: Calculating property tax increase

Ten taxing districts in suburban Cook County will have referendums on the ballot for next month's election that underestimate the amount taxes will increase if the measures pass, an assessors group says. Here's a look at how much the tax increases are portrayed on the ballots versus how much they would rise if the proposals pass.

Tax district	Tax increase as listed on ballot	Tax increase using state's standard formula
Arbor Park School District 145	\$60	\$202.21
Wilmette School District 39	\$58.80	\$198.16
West Northfield School District 31	\$49	\$165.13
Riverside-Brookfield HS District 208	\$44	\$148.28
Oak Park School District 97	\$37.40	\$126.04
Prospect Heights School District 23	\$35	\$117.95
Palos Fire District	\$30.40	\$64.03
Olympia Fields Park District	\$13.60	\$45.83
Lan Oak Park District	\$10	\$33.70
Indian Trails Public Library District*	\$2.77	\$9.34

SOURCE: Cook County Township Assessors Association * Cook County only

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A spokeswoman for Chapman and Cutler, one of the area's premier firms in handling such work for school and park districts, did not respond to calls seeking comment. Lynda Givens, a partner who does much of its work for local districts, also did not return calls.

Givens is "well known for her work as bond counsel to Illinois school districts" and "has worked on more than 1,000 financing transactions for Illinois schools, aggregating well in excess of \$2 billion," according to the law firm's website.

Peter Traczyk, the school board president for Oak Park Elementary School District 97, said that once questions were raised about his district's referendum questions, he contacted the law firm.

He said Chapman and Cutler defended its work, saying it did not include the equalizer in its calculations because state law did not specify it had to do so.

Traczyk said he trusts the firm interpreted state law correctly.

"It says, 'This is how you do' and we said, 'OK,'" Traczyk said. "The question being raised (by EISaffar) is that's not the equalized assessed value. While that is a correct statement, it has nothing to do with what we had to do to legally follow the law to craft the ballot language."

EISaffar said that just because the state law doesn't explicitly mention Cook County's equalizer doesn't mean it should be ignored.

Oak Park's ballot question states the district's property taxes would increase \$37.40 per \$100,000 of assessed valuation, but EISaffar said that number should read \$126.04 once the equalizer is applied.

Both Traczyk and EISaffar agreed that another figure released by the district — that the referendum measure would increase tax bills by \$38 per every \$1,000 of existing property taxes paid — is both easier to calculate and an accurate representation of the potential tax increase.

Unfortunately, said Berwyn Township assessor Al Kveton, voters won't see that number in the booth.

"A lot of people don't follow this and don't know what numbers the district is putting out," Kveton said. "A lot of people walk in the voting booth and make their decision based on what that number is."

That's what concerns Noel Kuriakos, a member of the Citizens Alliance of Oak Park, a loosely organized group of residents opposing the tax proposal.

"It's basic psychology to present the smaller number instead of the larger number," he said. "With all the confusion, the information given isn't in the best interest of the taxpayer. The spirit of the law has not been followed."

EISaffar and Kveton both said they do not blame officials in the districts and do not believe they are trying to deceive the public. EISaffar, who is Oak Park Township assessor, said the Oak Park school board did what most taxing bodies do: hire a legal expert and trust their advice.

"District 97, in general, is putting on a good campaign and is putting out good numbers," EISaffar said. "I don't think they are trying to pull the wool over anyone's eyes."