Pickens property values go down

First drop recorded means lower tax bill

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For the first time since the state started posting figures online in 1997, the value of the property on Pickens County's tax rolls went down in this year's reassessment, records show.

And that meant an increase in the tax millage for the county, school district and most municipalities.

For most people, the 3.6 percent decrease in assessed values of real property was a good thing, in terms of their tax bill, said Pickens County Assessor Daniel Day.

"In the previous reassessments the values increased anywhere from 25 to 30 percent," he said.

When the value or property goes up, local governments are given a formula by the county auditor that tells them how much to decrease their millage rate to keep the same amount of money coming in.

When it's the other way around, as it was this time, millage has to go up to keep things even.

In theory, it all equals out.

Depending on where you live, though, that may not be the case.

When the tax bills went out this year, 1,243 property owners disagreed with the county's assessment.

That may sound like a big number, but according to Day, it's the fewest appeals since at least 1990. That year, there were 6,753 appeals, he said.

In the previous reassessment, in 2009, nearly 3,500 filed appeals with the county, he said.

The overall decrease in home values, based on the sale price of surrounding properties, hasn't come back in most areas since the housing bubble bust at the start of the recession in the fall of 2008, Day said.

"House prices have not recovered," said Holley Ulbrich, Clemson University professor

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emerita of economics. "They're starting to recover now but that's past the time that they were actually working on the reassessment."

A big factor in the overall dip in assessed value of the county is a decline in personal property value — particularly automobiles, according to County Auditor Brent Suddeth.

"Apparently the fleet of cars on the road is old," Upbrich said. "People have been slow to replace cars when the economy was weak."

The downward slide in assessed property value counts only the properties that were on the books at the last reassessment, at the end of 2008, Suddeth said. With $6.3 million in assessed value of new properties, the value of real estate fell by about a half a percent, he said.

With personal property taken into account, the decline was more than 1.5 percent, he said.

That meant most jurisdictions had to raise their millage to generate the same amount of money.

The number of mills levied rose for Pickens County government, the Pickens County School District and five of the county's seven municipalities.

All the local governments followed the auditor's formula to equalize their cash flow, Suddeth said, although the School Board was divided on the issue.

The board approved a 4.7 mill increase on a 4-2 vote, with Chairman Alex Saitta and trustee Jimmy Gillespie opposing it.

"When tax base shrinks, you should shrink the size of government accordingly," Saitta said. "Unfortunately, government rarely does that. That's why it keeps growing and growing."

The board voted to roll up the millage for operations from 108 to 112 mills. Debt service millage went up 0.7 mills to 53.2 mills.

Homeowners don't pay property taxes for operations, but the operational mill increase affects businesses, second homes, rental properties and vehicles.

"For some taxpayers, this could result in a tax decrease if their property was assessed a lower value," district spokesman John Eby said. "Those whose properties were assessed at the same or a higher value will see a small tax increase."

Without raising the millage, the district would have had $1.1 million less coming in, which would have meant either running a deficit "or making drastic cuts," Eby said.

Saitta said the millage increase is bad for business in the county.

"This is going to be harder on manufacturing and business because those valuations are up in the reassessment and now they have a higher tax rate too," he said.

The 0.7-mill debt millage increase will apply to homeowners and is mostly due to payment on bonds for the district's construction program of the past few years, Saitta said.

Pickens County Council approved an increase from 53.2 to 55.3 mills for operations and a hike from 3.9 to 4 mills for bonds.

Other millage adjustments approved by local government operations this fall, according to Suddeth were:

- Easley: from 58 to 60 mills
- Liberty: 80 to 79.7 mills
- Norris: 72.2 to 73.8 mills
- Central: 72 to 74 mills
- Clemson: 83.4 to 82.2 mills
- Six Mile: 31.8 to 33.5 mills
- Pickens city: 60.3 to 64.9 mills
- County sewer: 1.9 to 2 mills
- Tri-County Technical College: unchanged at 2.6 mills