

NBA star's former home offers study in appealing property tax assessments



Newly-minted Chicago Bull Dwyane Wade's former home in South Holland is being put up for sale by his ex-wife for just \$350,000.

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A celebrity's story illustrates a big problem in the south suburbs: high property taxes and the difficulty of appealing them.

NBA star Dwyane Wade's former home in South Holland — once valued at \$1.2 million — is on the market for the low, low price of \$350,000, the Chicago Tribune reported last week. That may sound within reach for many area families.

"Live like a millionaire for a fraction of the cost!" the property listing says.

The 7,847-square-foot home on a 3-acre lot features six bedrooms, seven bathrooms, a theater room, an exercise room, sauna, outdoor pool and basketball court, and two garages capable

of housing six cars.

The home's location offers convenient interstate access to the nearby Dan Ryan Expressway at 159th Street. It stands out in the neighborhood, a mansion among modest homes that list for about \$150,000.

But there's a catch. The 2014 taxes for the property were \$58,176.

That's right. A family thinking about buying the home might be able to put enough money down on a 30-year, fixed-rate mortgage of less than 4 percent to manage payments of under \$2,000 a month.

But add a tax payment of nearly \$5,000 a month to that? Not many could swing that.

"Taxes reflect NO exemptions," the listing notes. "Current tax amount is in the process of being appealed."

Appealing one's property taxes may be a hassle, but it's something every homeowner in the south suburbs should consider.

South Holland is in Thornton Township. While some township assessor offices may offer assistance with property tax appeals, the actual process begins with an appeal to the Cook County assessor.

It's good to know this, since the clock begins ticking the moment assessment notices are sent. Property owners have just 30 days to file an appeal, and they need to gather documentation. Though it's not required, many find it's a good idea to spend about \$200 for an attorney to handle the complicated process.

When you appeal, you're actually challenging your property's assessed value rather than the amount of your property tax bill. In Cook County, deadlines vary by township, depending on when assessments are mailed out.

It's too late, for example, for residents of Palos and Bremen townships to appeal this year's assessments, which were mailed in April. Notices were sent in May to residents of Lemont and Stickney townships and in June to people in Worth and Hyde Park townships, and this year's appeals deadlines have passed for them, also.

But assessment notices are scheduled to be sent to residents in Orland Township July 25, Thornton Township Aug. 12, Rich Township Aug. 22, Bloom Township Sept. 6 and South Chicago Sept. 7.

Cook County properties are reassessed every three years, and this year some people in northern suburbs are getting shocked with big increases. South suburban townships will be reassessed next year.

The county assessor advises homeowners who appeal to gather documentation that shows a lack of uniformity among comparable properties. Recommended documentation includes photos of other properties in the neighborhood, an affidavit, a complaint form, an appraisal, and a closing statement if the property was sold within the past three years.

If a homeowner disagrees with the county assessor's decision, he can request a review. Even if the assessor grants a reduction, the homeowner can proceed to the next step, which is an appeal to the Board of Review. The board will schedule a hearing to look at the photos and other documentation to decide whether to change an assessment.

Cook County Board of Review commissioners often conduct informational seminars in various townships to explain the appeals process to area homeowners.

Homeowners unhappy with a Board of Review ruling still have a couple options. They can appeal to the Illinois Property Tax Appeal Board, or pursue a civil lawsuit.

Homeowners in the south suburbs have particular reason to consider appealing their property taxes. A recent report by the Institute for Housing Studies at DePaul University showed that home values in the south suburbs lag behind those in other Chicago-area communities that have recovered from the crash that triggered the Great Recession.

Many, including Gov. Bruce Rauner, note that Illinoisans pay the highest property taxes in the nation. And the highest tax rates in Illinois are in the south suburbs, a recent Tribune analysis found. In November, the Tribune determined that 18 of the Chicago area's 25 highest tax rates were in the south suburbs.

The highest was in Ford Heights, where the tax rates were 10.48 percent for residences and a staggering 26.2 percent for commercial properties. Riverdale, Park Forest, Calumet City,

Dolton, Phoenix, Burnham, Country Club Hills, Markham, Hazel Crest, Harvey and University Park also ranked in the top 20.

The \$58,176 tax bill for Wade's former home in South Holland is but one notable example of what many in the south suburbs already know. Property tax rates here are among the highest in the nation.

It's getting so bad, many are no longer able to afford the taxes on homes where they've lived for years. You see evidence of foreclosed and abandoned properties in communities where windows are boarded up and weeds grow tall in yards.

High taxes make homes unaffordable. Empty homes lead to blight, increased crime and lower property values for others.

The bulk of property taxes are used to fund local schools. I've said before how the south suburbs especially feel the pain of the inequity in the state's school-funding formula.

The state needs to fix that problem, and Rauner's formation of a commission to come up with a legislative solution shows the urgency of that need. But the Southland as a region should do more to collectively find creative ways to lower tax bills.

Otherwise, even opportunities like million-dollar mansions at bargain prices will be passed over because of high property taxes.

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