

Bill for back taxes irks neighborhood

Leander residents who were left off rolls are looking around for somebody to blame

By M.B. Taboada

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

About 250 Leander residents are still reeling from the revelation that they owe thousands in back taxes to the city.

Most residents of the Ridgewood South subdivision must pay four years of taxes that were

not collected after the neighborhood was annexed in 2001. Some residents who just moved into the neighborhood are learning that they, too, will have to pay the back taxes, since state law says taxes stay with a property, not an individual owner.

Residents are just beginning to receive notices for city taxes, with the average bill for \$1,732. The residents have until Jan. 31, 2008, to pay.

The issue came up after the city did not properly report the annexation to the Williamson County Appraisal District,

which in turn notifies the county tax office. As a result, the county tax office did not know to bill those residents.

However, during property appraisals this year, the Williamson County Appraisal District discovered that the properties were not being taxed by the city.

Appraisal district officials notified city officials about the mistake in the past couple of months, said Bill Carroll, chief appraiser of the Williamson County Appraisal District.

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Mayor John Cowman mailed personal notifications to each resident affected by the mistake so that they were not surprised when they received the bills, he said.

"I felt compelled to notify them of the situation," said Cowman, who was not an elected official when the error occurred. "This is a grave situation for some people, and it's very sad. (The) frustration is that I can't fix it."

The residents have hired an attorney, and some are discussing whether they should try to recall the mayor and possibly other council members, saying that someone needs to be held accountable and should have realized over the years that they were not on tax rolls.

Although residents receive breakouts of taxes annually from the appraisal district with the value of their homes, most residents said they never noticed that city taxes were left off.

"Not one person here would have had a problem paying for it



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if we had been billed and known about it," resident Bill Garrison said.

Resident Doug Fugate said he might need to pick up a third job to pay for the taxes.

"A lot of people are concerned," Fugate said. "How in the heck am I supposed to pay that back?"

A similar situation has occurred at least one other time in Williamson County. A few years

ago, a Georgetown subdivision was not billed for taxes for eight years, said Williamson County Tax Assessor-Collector Deborah Hunt.

In that situation, the city reported the annexation, but the appraisal district did not add it to the rolls, Hunt said. Those residents had to pay five years in taxes, the maximum under state law.

In Ridgewood South, about 45 residents were paying city taxes, because those properties were annexed in 2000, and the city did properly notify the appraisal district, Carroll said. The rest of the subdivision was annexed in 2001 but was not reported.

Ben Ramirez will have to pay years of back taxes on the home even though he moved to the neighborhood two years ago. He said he might move if he must pay.

"It's really unfortunate that this situation creates a hardship on the taxpayers," Hunt said. "But that's the provision in the tax code that allows for that."

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