

Property appraisals going up again

Job growth prompts rise; some notices will arrive next week.

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In a sign of the region's relative economic health, homeowners in Travis, Hays and Williamson counties can expect to see increases in their 2008 property appraisals when they begin receiving notices in the mail soon, appraisers say.

The Travis Central Appraisal District is finalizing its proposed values for all real property in the county, including residential, office and retail properties. Preliminary values will be firmed up Friday, chief appraiser Patrick Brown said Tuesday.

Countywide, the average home value is up 11.5 percent, to \$285,511 compared with \$256,058 in 2007, Brown said. In the City of Austin, the average home value is \$266,807, up 12.55 percent from \$237,055 in 2007, Brown said.

Properties are valued as of Jan. 1 each year, as prescribed by the state's property tax code.

Brown emphasized that the figures are averages: When homeowners begin receiving their notices next week, some will see their property value increase while others could see a decline.

Brown said initial figures show some areas of the county, such as near Lago Vista and Marble Falls, are seeing "very strong appreciation rates" in home values because of the region's healthy economy.

"You have to keep in mind that this county added about 20,000 jobs last year," Brown said. "If you have more people coming in, that means more household demand, and that's going to push up home prices a little bit."

That's not to say Texas and the Austin area haven't experienced fallout from the national housing troubles and tighter mortgage lending practices. Home sales locally have cooled from previous record levels, dropping for the eighth consecutive month in February.

However, "the value of the typical house has continued to go up," Brown said. "And I think that trend would reverse itself if we had no or very little employment growth."

In Williamson County, 2008 home values will climb about 6 percent on average countywide, on \$20 billion of residential properties, chief appraiser Bill Carroll said.

"This year, it's even more sporadic than usual because of the market conditions," he said, adding that notices will be mailed Friday.

On the commercial side, office, retail and industrial property values in Williamson County are projected to rise about 9 percent on average, on about \$20 billion in commercial property, Carroll said.

Williamson County home values have been rising an average of 7 percent to 9 percent in recent years, "so we haven't been as exposed to a volatile market like a lot of the rest of the country," he said.

David Valle, chief appraiser in Hays County, said residential property owners there can expect to see single-digit increases when their notices arrive during the first week of May.

"We're still working the numbers, but it looks like definitely Hays County is bucking the national trend," Valle said.

"I think it's just people wanting to move into this area, especially the Kyle area. We're seeing a lot of commercial, retail and residential growth."

Rising property values don't always mean property tax increases, Valle said. Individual taxing authorities such as school districts, cities and counties can raise or lower their tax rates, depending on their budget needs, Valle said. Those rates are usually set in the fall.

Also, state law caps the rate at which most homes can increase in taxable value. Taxes on residences with a homestead exemption can rise no more than 10 percent per year.

In the Austin Independent School District, the average home sales price rose about 5.6 percent from 2006 to 2007, to \$287,079, according to the appraisal district.

Although that isn't a huge jump, Brown said, research by county appraisers indicates that property values are rising significantly in East Austin, primarily because of its relatively low prices and proximity to downtown and the University of Texas.

East Austin also is seeing a surge of new residential construction and redevelopment.

Unlike the stock market, where expectations drive values, appraisals reflect previous market conditions, said real estate consultant Charles Heimsath, president of Austin-based Capitol Market Research.

"These values reflect the market conditions of last spring and summer (2007) before the effects of sub-prime lending policies became painfully evident," he said.

If housing prices start to level off or decline this year, then appraisals will reflect the changes in 2009.

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More information on appraisals

Check your mail: Appraisal notices in Williamson County will be mailed Friday. In Travis County, the notices will start arriving next week. In Hays County, notices are expected to start arriving in early May.

To protest: The deadline for protesting property appraisals is June 1, or 30 days after receiving the appraisal notice, whichever comes last.

In Travis County, call 834-9138 for information on filing a protest or go to www.traviscad.org.

In Williamson County, call 930-3787 or go to www.wcad.org for information.

In Hays, call 512-268-2522 or go to www.hayscad.com.

FYI: Members of the Travis Appraisal Review Board will have a community forum from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. April 26 at the Carver Branch Library, 1161 Angelina St. The purpose is to educate the public about how the residential property valuations protest process works, how to file for exemptions, tax deferrals and the time line to protest values. Attendees are asked to bring their 2008 appraisal notice.

Courtesy of JB Goodwin