



## Travis launches online appraisal protests for some homeowners

*County officials hope to resolve more cases without personal hearings.*

By [Shonda Novak](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF  
Wednesday, May 5, 2010

**Thousands of Travis County homeowners will have a new option this year to protest property appraisals: handling the process online.**

It's a method that Harris County appraisal officials say has worked well in one of the country's largest metro areas as a faster, more convenient way to resolve protests.

Next week or soon after, the Travis Central Appraisal District will send appraisal notices to 35,000 homeowners who qualify for the online option, said Chief Appraiser Patrick Brown. Some will be eligible for an online settlement offer.

Appraisal notices have been mailed to 200,000 residential property owners in the county. Another 60,000 will be mailed soon.

The online option debuts this year in Travis County for homeowners whose property meets certain criteria, namely houses valued at less than \$300,000 and that are in "very homogenous neighborhoods," Brown said. That means they are near homes of like size, age and condition and are not difficult to appraise.

The online system could be a relief for some homeowners, who otherwise have to attend hearings at the appraisal district to present their challenge. That can involve taking time off from work and long waits at the appraisal office.

**Last year, the Travis district was swamped with 94,325 protests — 50 percent more than usual — and mailed settlement offers to 21,605 homeowners, something it had not done before. More than a quarter were resolved without hearings.**

**Brown said there might be fewer protests this year because appraised values are down for many homeowners. Countywide, the value of an average home is down 2.8 percent, to \$279,763, after a 1.7 percent increase last year.**

The online option is the result of state legislation that requires appraisal districts of 500,000 or more people to make the electronic protest available for homeowners. They also may receive online settlement offers.

The Dallas district also is adopting the online system this year, and more districts will make the switch next year.

"It's uncharted territory for us," Brown said. "It's going to be a learning curve that we go through this first year." He hopes to expand it to all property owners.

**Eligible homeowners will be given a website address and a code to access their account.**

From that screen, they will be able to file a protest online. If the district determines that the property is eligible for an online settlement, the taxpayer will receive an online offer.

Homeowners who reject the offer, or who do not receive one, will be scheduled for a formal hearing. The online option is not available to homeowners who have hired a professional to challenge their appraisals.

Those who file a protest online will receive the same information as other protestors, Brown said, including sales data and appraised values for at least five comparable properties in the neighborhood.

The Harris County Appraisal District has had an electronic protest-filing system in place for several years, including for residential and commercial property owners as well as tax agents/consultants.

Sharon Boyd, the district's director of appraisal operations, said the program has been a big success, with 75 percent of homeowners who received an online offer accepting it.

In Harris County, the cutoff for a homeowner to use the online system is a market value of less than \$1 million.

Last year, about 380,000 protests were filed in Harris County; about 25 percent of those homeowners filed protests electronically.

Of those, 62 percent opted to settle online. The district made offers in 49 percent of those cases, with a 75 percent acceptance rate.

On average, values were reduced about 6 percent for online settlements, compared with reductions of 6.5 to 7 percent in informal hearings with an appraiser or at formal hearings before an appraisal review board, Boyd said.

Based on two years of data in the Travis district, Brown said he would expect online protests to be filed for approximately 6,000 to 9,000 parcels, with approximately 4,800 to 8,100 of those potentially resolved online.

Brown said he thinks the online protests will save the district "a lot of data entry time." But he said there probably won't be any savings in the first year because of the costs of computer software and hardware to implement the system.

"It is difficult to determine if this is going to save or cost the district money in the future," Brown said. "It should, of course, create some opportunities for us to improve our customer service."

In Harris County, Boyd said the online system has made the process more convenient, smoother and efficient.

Appraisers can "easily evaluate" 75 online protests a day compared with 25 a day if appraisers meet with individual property owners, Boyd said.

"It helps protests get resolved sooner and saves the property owner from having to take off work and make a trip to the office. There are a lot of positives here."

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**