March 14, 2008

The Honorable Dave Murzin
7100 Plantation Road, Suite 3
Pensacola, FL 32504

Dear Representative Murzin:

Please review the following suggestions for property tax relief. These are not just my opinions but reflect those of many Escambia County property owners.

1) It appears that the intent of the 1992 Constitutional Amendment (10) is in conflict with the "Recapture Rule". The present circumstances reflect a declining market, with the current rule mandating that if the market value does not drop below the assessed value, the homestead may still get up to a 3% increase. This not only effectively insulates the taxing authorities, but has the consequence of increasing the owner's current ratio between market and assessed value. This rule, as it stands, would also appear to undermine the recently passed Amendment 1. An example would be with an increase of 3% to a homeowner's cap, even with the additional homestead exemption, this owner could see an increase in their tax bill. This has the potential of affecting half the property owners in Escambia County.

This "Recapture Rule" needs to be addressed so homeowners maintain the same market to assessed value ratio, especially in a declining market. I would suggest the following language: "If the market value of a homestead declines, the assessed value would be reduced by the same percentage". This change would be consistent with the intent of Amendment 10, as well as the newly enacted Amendment 1 which promises property tax relief.

2) Pensacola is a military town with several bases, as well as a large number of military retirees. The new veteran discount for disabled veterans due to combat injury is a significant benefit to those who serve us. However, this exemption has two points that need to be addressed:
    A) The veteran is required to be 65 years of age; this eliminates some Vietnam veterans, as well as all of the men and women that have served since. (Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.)
    B) The veteran's induction site must have been in the State of Florida. This is another obstacle that eliminates people who may have been loyal Florida residents for 45 years or more. They are now permanent residents of our State and sacrificed for our country.

    I would propose eliminating the age and entrance requirements as echoed by many veterans visiting this office.

3) We have several exemptions (widow, widower & disability) that are $500. In Escambia County, that saves taxpayers approximately $9. This is hardly worth filing for nor is it cost effective for the Property Appraiser to process. These exemptions have not changed since inception nor kept pace with inflation.

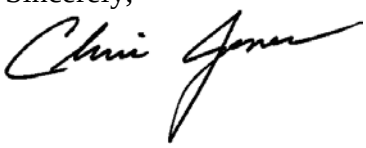
My recommendation would be to increase these exemptions to match the veteran exemption that was recently changed from $500 to $5,000. This could then be indexed to keep pace with inflation.

4) The State of Florida, and especially Escambia County, was devastated by the storms in 2004 and 2005. Many homeowners were forced to leave their homestead due to an act of nature, not by choice. Many of these homeowners are still engaged in legal battles trying to recover insurance money. I have heard from many homeowners since the passage of Amendment 1 seeking some type of "Grandfathering" of their homestead cap utilizing portability. My response has always been that the law does not allow a retroactive portability; however, I feel that this would be the right thing to do. These property owners have suffered much.

   I would suggest language that would allow a property owner, who was forced to move due to the fact their homestead was destroyed during the 2004-2005 storms, the ability to "port" the SOH savings to their new homestead.

Thank you on the behalf of the citizens of Escambia County.

Sincerely,



Chris Jones, CFA
ESCAMBIA COUNTY PROPERTY APPRAISER

cc: Senator Ken Pruitt, Senate President
Senator Mike Haridopolos
Senator Durell Peaden, Jr.
Senator Don Gaetz
Representative Marco Rubio, Speaker
Representative Greg Evers
Representative Ray Sansom
Representative Clay Ford