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## County officials warn of property assessment 'scam'

By Shaun Bishop  
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Local county assessors are warning residents not to be duped by official-looking letters from companies that offer to charge homeowners a fee to help them file for a lower property valuation, possibly lowering their taxes.

The problem, officials say, is residents can do the so-called "decline in value" requests themselves by filling out a simple one-page form — for free.

"These folks are very deceptive," said Santa Clara County Assessor Larry Stone. "There's no reason for anybody to pay for a service that the assessor provides for free."

Assessor's offices in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties have received hundreds of calls in the past week from residents wondering about the mailings, officials said.

The letters offer to charge a homeowner a fee ranging from \$95 to \$179 to file documents with the county assessor to request a lower property tax assessment, often claiming they can save homeowners hundreds or thousands of dollars in taxes. One even threatens to charge a \$30 "late fee" if the resident does not respond to the letter by Feb. 26.

"These firms seem to be preying on this economy and the fact that people don't understand that this is a free service," said Warren Slocum, the assessor-county clerk-recorder for San Mateo County, who

sent out an electronic alert to residents about the "scam" on Tuesday.

A man who answered the phone at Property Tax Reassessment, an outfit with a Los Angeles address that has been sending the reassessment letters, said no one could answer a reporter's questions over the phone.

Slocum and Stone both said they have asked the counties' respective district attorney's offices to look into the letters and see if any laws have been broken.

The decline in value reviews, which were established by Proposition 8 in 1978, allow property owners to ask county assessors for a re-evaluation of their property value for tax purposes if they believe the market value has fallen.

With recent declines in the housing market, thousands of Bay Area residents have filed the forms in the past year. Stone said his office proactively lowered assessments for 42,000 properties and got 3,000 requests from residents for lower valuations that were granted.

Slocum said his office has processed 8,600 reassessment requests from San Mateo County residents for the 2008-09 tax year, with 5,200 reductions approved.

Many longtime homeowners likely will not qualify for lowered assessments, since even if their home's market value has dropped, their properties are already assessed at low values. But more recent homebuyers may benefit from a review, officials say.

Stone said even he got one of the "bucket shop" letters from a company offering to charge him to request a lower assessed value for his Sunnyvale home. He said the letters could exploit the elderly or

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people who are simply looking to save some tax money in a down economy.

"This is a terrible thing to do when people are really hurting for money," Stone said.

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Decline in value forms

Call your local assessor's office with questions about decline in value requests.

Santa Clara County Assessor: 408-299-5300

San Mateo County Assessor: 650-363-4500

Forms are also available online at:

Santa Clara County: [eforms.sccgov.org/lfservlet/DeclineInValueRequest](http://eforms.sccgov.org/lfservlet/DeclineInValueRequest)

San Mateo County: [www.smcare.org/library/forms/forms\\_declineapp.asp](http://www.smcare.org/library/forms/forms_declineapp.asp)

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