

**POLITICS & GOVERNMENT**    JUNE 26, 2016 8:31 PM

# Taxed-out Texans seek property tax relief

**HIGHLIGHTS**

Skyrocketing property rates make some fear they'll be taxed out of their homes

North Texas leaders consider cutting tax rates so they won't gouge homeowners

State lawmakers say they'll take on the issue when they go back to work in 2017



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FORT WORTH — Jim Riddlesperger knows one thing for sure.

If local property values continue spiking as they have in recent years, he and his wife may have to leave the quiet, tree-lined TCU neighborhood they’ve lived in for nearly 30 years when he retires.

They know it’s good news when their property values go up, but with a nearly \$100,000 spike in their home’s market value this year, their tax bill grows as well.



He’s not alone.

Similar cases are heard across the county and state, as tapped-out homeowners facing larger-than-ever tax bills because of skyrocketing property values are turning to elected officials and asking for relief.

Fort Worth Mayor Betsy Price and Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins are among those responding, saying those higher property values generate more tax dollars for their community and it might be time to lower tax rates.

At a time when property taxes are growing at a far faster rate than salaries, state lawmakers also are reviewing the issue as a growing number of Texans fear being taxed out of their homes.

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**I DON’T SEE HOW ANY TAXING JURISDICTION IN THE COUNTY CAN JUSTIFY NOT LOWERING THE TAX RATE.**

Tarrant County Tax Assessor Collector Ron Wright

“Given the increase [in home values] we are looking at, I don’t see how any taxing jurisdiction in the county can justify not lowering the tax rate,” said Tarrant County Tax Assessor Collector Ron Wright, who collects tax payments locally.

### ‘Big political issue’

Property values became a hot topic in Tarrant County earlier this year when residential values spiked around 14 percent.

Homeowners began filing protests because higher property values generally means higher tax bills.

“This could become a big political issue in local elections, especially if too many citizens have to pay higher tax bills,” said Allan Saxe, an associate political science professor at the University of Texas at Arlington.

Fort Worth’s Price has been among those to suggest lowering property tax rates. She already has asked the city manager to draw up a budget that includes dropping the current tax rate from 85.5 cents per \$100 of property valuation.



Price said she and council members are asking City Manager David Cooke for different budget scenarios with different tax rates. They will compare those to what the city needs — and what requests are.

“People’s appraisals have gone dramatically up and, while we want to still be able to deliver the same level of service and the same functions citizens need, we have to take a look at what that does to your tax bill,” she said. “And your tax bill is driven directly by rate we set.”

Although the revenue increase would be a nice windfall, Fort Worth isn’t in a position where it needs an infusion of revenue, Price said.

“If we were where we were four years ago, when we were laying off employees and cutting services, and this happened, we probably would keep same tax rate to keep things stable,” Price said. “We’ve gotten smarter with our funding; we’ve gotten better with our finances and better with our investments.”

Dallas County’s Jenkins asked commissioners earlier this month to cut the tax rate because property values have grown so much. He also has said he hopes Dallas County cities and school districts will follow their lead.

## A look around

Here’s a look at what some other local entities are doing.

**Arlington** Higher property values have city officials talking about a potential property tax rate reduction, the first in 15 years. Preliminary property assessments rose 8.5 percent, or \$1.7 billion, and the 2015-16 general fund is projected to come in about 1.1 percent, or \$2.4 million,

under budget. But there are many expenses to consider, including \$5.9 million to bring staff compensation more in line with the area labor market, and as much as \$3.2 million for police body-worn cameras.

**Carroll school district** Officials haven't decided what to do about this year's tax rate, but they dropped it half a cent in 2015. It currently is \$1.395 per \$100 valuation.

**Colleyville** The City Council hasn't talked about a specific tax rate for the next year. Currently, the rate is 25.5 cents per \$100 valuation.

**Fort Worth school district** Officials say they don't have any plans to drop the tax rate, which currently is \$1.32 per \$100 valuation.

**Grapevine** In the past, officials have adopted a property tax at the effective rate, which means property owners don't see increases in their city tax bill. In the current fiscal year, the tax rate dropped from 33.24 cents per \$100 valuation to 32.8 cents. 

**Grapevine-Colleyville school district** Officials plan to raise the tax rate because of the successful \$249 million May bond election. The rate increase will not exceed 12.81 cents. Growth in property values should make it "significantly lower." The current total tax rate is \$1.32.

**Haslet** Officials have not yet begun to consider the city's tax rate. The city, which sits in both Tarrant and Denton counties, has a tax rate of 29.2 cents per \$100 of valuation.

**Keller** City Council members aim to find a "permanent solution" and have discussed either reducing the tax rate for the fourth consecutive year or increasing the homestead exemption, currently 1 percent. The city's tax rate is 43.4 cents per \$100 valuation.

**Keller school district** Officials have not yet determined the 2016 tax rate. The current total tax rate is \$1.54 per \$100 valuation.

**Roanoke** The city is weeks away from considering a new tax rate. The current rate is \$0.37512 per \$100 dollars of valuation.

**Southlake** Officials upped the homestead exemption to 16 percent for 2017 and say they hope lawmakers will give cities more ways to reduce tax burdens next year. The tax rate has been 46.2 cents per \$100 of assessed value for more than a decade.

**Trophy Club** Officials haven't made a decision on tax relief. The tax rate has dropped every year since 2011. Last year it was 48.4 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

**Westlake** Leaders say it's too soon to say if the town can drop its tax rate. The city has maintained its tax rate of 15.6 cents per \$100 of assessed value since 2011.

## Legislative review

The issue has become so politically charged that Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick created a new Senate committee to find ways to reduce the tax burden on property owners.

The Senate Select Committee on Property Tax Reform and Relief traveled around the state, visiting cities ranging from Arlington to Lubbock, collecting testimony expected to be used next year when some propose legislation geared to bring tax relief.

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### IT'S AN UNSUSTAINABLE TREND.

State Sen. Kelly Hancock, R-North Richland Hills, about continually skyrocketing property values

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“No matter where you live in Texas, property taxes are rising faster than household incomes,” said state Sen. Kelly Hancock, R-North Richland Hills, a member of the committee.

“Homeowners have every right to be frustrated about that.

“It’s an unsustainable trend,” he said. “I’m confident the work of this committee will ultimately simplify the appraisal process and keep more of taxpayers’ hard-earned money in their own pockets.”

State Sen. Konni Burton, R-Colleyville, attended the Arlington hearing and said the Legislature must do something to help.

While local officials determine property tax rates, “as property valuations continue to increase year after year, too few cities and counties are lowering their rates to offer Texas families and businesses the tax relief they need and deserve,” she said.

“The state has every right to intervene to provide a remedy, and I’m certain we will.”

State Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, said he believes the Legislature needs to look at the state’s “seriously flawed public school finance system” to help property owners, since the majority of property bills are earmarked to help fund public schools.

“Any meaningful change has to involve the question of how we fund public education in a more fair way, and a more robust way, that we provide better educational services to our students,” he said. “That’s the approach we need, as opposed to passing some law that comes down on cities and counties.”

## Top 2017 issue?

Texas is a property tax-dependent state, meaning that most of the money used to run cities and schools comes from property taxes.

Lawmakers have long expressed concern about the system, rising valuations and the resulting taxes, even creating a blue-ribbon task force to review the issue.

But little has changed because Texas doesn't have a state income tax to help generate tax dollars.

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### **OLDER TEXANS ARE WORRIED ABOUT BEING TAXED OUT OF THEIR HOMES.**

Brandon Rottinghaus, an associate professor of political science at the University of Houston

“Tax burdens in the major cities and surrounding suburbs are especially high,” said Brandon Rottinghaus, an associate professor of political science at the University of Houston. “Older Texans are worried about being taxed out of their homes, and first-time home buyers may find it hard to buy houses in desirable areas.”

Last year, Texas voters amended the Texas Constitution to boost homestead exemption amounts for school district property taxes from \$15,000 to \$25,000, which cuts property tax bills for the average Texas household by about \$125.

“There is little political downside to legislators calling for restraining the growth of appraisals,” Rottinghaus said. “Nobody likes the taxman, but they like the appraiser even less.”

“The property tax issue will certainly be in the top five agenda items for the Legislature.”

*Staff writers Sandra Baker, Robert Cadwallader, Sandra Engelland, Lance Murray, Marty Sabota, Nick Sakelaris, Diane Smith and Mark Smith contributed to this report.*

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## **TEXAS PROPERTY TAX RATES**

Here's a look at the tax rates in some Tarrant County cities. These are cents per \$100 of assessed valuation.

**Arlington** — 64.8

**Azle** — 67.9

**Bedford** — 49.4

**Dalworthington Gardens** — 25.3

**Eules** — 46.7

**Everman** — 1.25

**Fort Worth** — 85.5

**Hurst** — 61

**Keller** — 43.4

**Mansfield** — 71

**North Richland Hills** — 61

**Southlake** — 46.2

**Westworth Village** — 50

*SOURCE: TARRANT COUNTY TAX ASSESSOR COLLECTOR*

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I hope they succeed. Our mortgage payment went up \$200.00 because of the increase in taxes. - Georgana Davis

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you mortgage payment did not go up ... the escrow did.  
And ... in a state where "income tax" is a dirty word, we have this which happens instead --

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**David Benedetto** · Substitute Teacher at Grapevine-Colleyville ISD

Whilst no one "likes to pay taxes", this is the system We The People have chosen ... remember, "income tax" is a dirty word around here.

So, if you live in an expensive house, you get a big tax bill. No one is "taxing you out of your home" or anything else. We pay property taxes on market forces ... and if the market says your home is worth \$xx.xx, then pay.

Most cities will make adjustments. The State Legislature needs to mind their own business, as we all saw the disaster they have created with education and property taxes.

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