



TAXES

Property taxes rise across St. Louis region



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Tax bills are higher for many of the region's residents this year, driven largely by rate hikes in area school districts, but also boosted by an uncommon spike in some car and truck values.

Total property taxes billed in St. Louis city, St. Louis County, St. Charles County and Illinois' Madison and St. Clair counties jumped by an estimated \$87 million to \$3.5 billion in total, with the highest percent increase in Madison County.

Most of the extra cash will go to school districts. Sixteen of 24 St. Louis County school districts raised their rates this year, as did four of the six St. Charles County districts.

St. Louis Public Schools bumped up theirs by 23 cents on \$100 of assessed value, to \$4.41. That means the owner of a home appraised at \$100,000 and assessed for tax purposes at \$19,000 would pay an extra \$43.70 if the home's value didn't change.

Patrick Wallace, spokesman for the city schools, said the district was recuperating money lost to the ongoing decline in property values. No one, he said, voiced opposition at the public meeting this fall when the district's Special Administrative Board voted to increase taxes.

Besides, he said, the district has trimmed operating expenses every year for the past five, from about \$348 million to \$265 million this coming year.

This would have been a tough year to cut further, he said — the closing of the Imagine Schools charter school chain added thousands of students to the district's rolls all at once.

Still, the St. Louis Public Schools has continued to ask taxpayers for more money. In 2007, it garnered \$190 million of its budget from local property taxes. Last year, that number grew to \$203 million. This year, it will jump to \$214 million.

And that trend has persisted in school districts across the region, even as the economy tanked in recent years.

In 2007, the year before the recession began, St. Louis County's school districts billed residents for \$917 million in real estate and personal property taxes. This year, school districts charged residents \$990 million, \$45 million more than last year and an 8 percent increase since 2007.

Meanwhile, the latest census figures show that the median household income bottomed out between 2007 and 2011, the last year statistics were available. It fell 12 percent in the city of St. Louis, 11 percent in St. Louis and Madison counties and 9 percent in St. Charles County. Only in St. Clair County were incomes relatively stable.

Among St. Louis County school districts, the three highest tax rate increases on a percentage basis were in Bayless, Ladue and Brentwood.

Voters in Bayless approved a 28 percent tax rate increase, while Ladue voters approved a tax rate hike of 17 percent.

In Brentwood, the School Board acted on its own to raise the district's rate by almost 10 percent, to \$3.95 per \$100 of assessed valuation.

Brentwood's tax rate has jumped by 44 percent since 2007, when the district's rate was \$2.74. That same period saw a steady rise in staff and administration salaries, which account for about 80 percent of a typical district's budget.

"We have to ask for enough in our operating levy to pay for expenses," said Brentwood Superintendent Dave Faulkner.

Tax officials in St. Clair County said school districts have been asking for more in recent years to offset revenue not received from the state. And as Illinois seeks to lay the burden of covering school employee pensions on the individual districts, the revenue sought from county taxes is expected to increase dramatically.

On top of that, many residents in Missouri can no longer count on paying less in personal property taxes on their vehicles, as an increasing number of makes and models are appreciating, rather than depreciating. (Illinois does not charge personal property tax.)

St. Louis County residents were billed for \$247 million in personal property taxes this year, up

from \$228 million last year, an 8 percent increase, fueled at least in part by the increase in vehicle values.

It started with SUVs, which jumped in value at about the time the federal government was engaged in its Cash for Clunkers program in 2009.

This year, late-model gas sippers have joined the gas guzzlers in rising in value.

Tina Hyken, 48, of Ellisville said that when she and her husband, Mark, bought Toyota Prius hybrids (hers in 2005 and his in 2008), she said the couple sacrificed size and luxury for the good of the environment.

"I tell people it's a \$20,000 car with \$10,000 worth of green technology in it," Hyken said.

And while Hyken said she accepted that the money saved on gas might never equal the hybrids' extra cost, she appreciated paying less in property taxes every year as the vehicles depreciated in value.

Until this year.

Taxes on the Hykens' cars rose this year to \$614 from \$540. "It's a very disturbing thing because there are older gas guzzlers out there that are assessed super low while we're getting penalized when we're trying to do the right thing for the environment," Hyken said.

St. Louis County Assessor Jake Zimmerman said numerous used vehicles have increased in value, including higher-grade SUVs and certain makes of pickups.

"We are in a strange economic situation," Zimmerman said. "People haven't been buying new cars for several years." And that, he said, leaves a "large number" of newer used cars selling for more money than they used to.

Zimmerman said that the State Tax Commission requires county assessors across Missouri to use market values as set by the National Automobile Dealers Association.

While it is too late to appeal this year's values before the county's Board of Equalization, Zimmerman said that owners may include a note with their tax payment indicating that they are paying under protest and wish to appeal before the state.

Personal property taxes are due in most Missouri counties by Dec. 31.

Mark Schlinkmann and Marlon A. Walker of the Post-Dispatch contributed to this report.

Tax hauls grow around the region

The amount of money that local taxing jurisdictions are collecting has increased since 2007 and will do so again for 2012:

MADISON COUNTY

2007: \$305,600,000

2011: \$361,500,000

2012: \$ 377,200,000

ST. CHARLES COUNTY

2007: \$478,236,208

2011: \$507,229,800

2012: \$520,854,388

ST. CLAIR COUNTY

2007: \$310,500,000

2011: \$ 334,000,000

2012: \$ 333,000,000

ST. LOUIS

2007: \$327,338,587

2011: \$350,843,392

2012: \$364,483,158

ST. LOUIS COUNTY

2007: \$1,851,724,522

2011: \$1,861,237,162

2012: \$1,906,277,856

Sources: Government entities

Notes: Merchants/Manufacturers property taxes and railroad property taxes are estimates; final figures are not yet available.