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## Henderson: Better keep an eye on your tax bill

By Joe Henderson



The deal to sell Steve Queenan's house in Lutz was going smoothly. He had a buyer, he liked the price, but when the appraisal came back on his residence of 2,565 square feet — well, oops. It was actually 2,297 square feet.

The wrong size had been entered into the county's database when he bought the house seven years ago.

"The county basically told me, 'Oh, it looks like we entered it wrong,' " Queenan said.

It dawned on Queenan that since his property tax bill was based in part on square footage, he had been overpaying the entire time he lived there. The county agreed and offered a refund, but only for three years.

Three? But he had been paying too much for seven.

Too bad. That's the law.

\* \* \* \* \*

"**The law also says** that if we found out he had been paying less than he should have, we can only collect (back payments) for three years," Hillsborough County property appraiser Rob Turner said Friday.

Wait a minute. Shannon Behnken of The Tampa Tribune and News Channel 8 reported this week on a couple socked with an \$8,000 back taxes charge because for nine years, the county billed them for less than they owed, even though they had always paid the bills they were given.

That county slapped a lien on their house until the bill is paid. Now people are wondering what's going on downtown with their money.

The short version: Two different laws are involved.

The couple with back taxes had a problem with the homestead exemption, which means the state can claim back taxes for up to 10 years.

"We find people every day with homestead exemptions they don't deserve," Turner said, adding most cases happened because people simply didn't understand the law.

The problem with the house in Lutz was a clerical error, thus the three-year window. The agencies involved were following what the statutes said to do.

Are those laws fair, though?

It doesn't seem so.

\* \* \* \* \*

**If the county took** too much of Queenan's money, by honest mistake or not, the law should require the county give it back — all of it.

"We did nothing wrong," Queenan said.

A good place to start would be in the Legislature. Lawmakers should find a way to make it right when errors like these occur.

Queenan figures the original error cost him about \$25,000 on the price of the home, and that's on top of the overcharge in taxes.

"I paid for a 2,565-square-foot home and got one almost 300 square feet smaller," he said, and when it came time to sell — and the error was discovered — he had to lower his agreed-upon price from \$276,000 to about \$251,000.

That's not all.

"If we hadn't tried to sell our home, we'd have still been overpaying taxes," Queenan said.

The county says it appraises about 550,000 properties a year and there are problems with 2,000. Mistakes happen, so it's a good idea to protect yourself. Read your bill closely and challenge anything that seems odd.

Otherwise, you might wind up with a lien on your house.

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