


MEMORANDUM

CBJ Law Department

To: Board of Equalization
From: John W. Hartle, City Attorney 
Subject: Board of Equalization: Standards and Procedures
Date: April 19, 2013

SUMMARY

- (1) The Board of Equalization functions as a quasi-judicial body, which means that the Board has authority to hear and decide assessment appeals in a manner similar to a court, but less formal than a court.
- (2) The burden of proof is on the appellant property owner.
- (3) The Board should make specific findings in support of its decisions, and should base its decisions on the record.
- (4) To grant an appeal, Board members should make a motion to grant the appeal and vote in the affirmative; to deny an appeal (that is, uphold the assessor's decision), Board members should make a motion to grant the appeal and vote in the negative. The Board may also grant an appeal and make an adjustment to the assessment different from that requested by the appellant.
- (5) The assessment process, the Board's procedures and standards, and property taxation are all governed by Alaska Statute and CBJ Code. AS 29.45.190 - AS 29.45.210 provide the time for filing appeals, procedures before the Board, and the standards to be used by the Board in deciding appeals. The pertinent statutes and code sections are attached to this memorandum for your reference.

DEADLINE FOR FILING APPEAL

In order to appeal an assessment, a taxpayer must file an appeal within 30 days after the date of mailing of the assessment notice. AS 29.45.190(b); CBJ 15.05.160(a). After this time period, the right of appeal ceases, unless the Board finds that the taxpayer was “unable” to comply with the 30-day filing requirement. The word “unable” as used in this section does not include situations where the taxpayer forgot about or overlooked the assessment notice, was out of town during the period for filing an appeal, or similar situations. Rather, it covers situations that are beyond the control of the taxpayer and, as a practical matter, prevent the taxpayer from recognizing what is at stake and dealing with it. Such situations would include a physical or mental disability serious enough to prevent the person from dealing rationally with his or her private affairs.

There are few situations in which a taxpayer is “unable” to comply with the requirement that an appeal be filed within 30 days of the date of mailing of the notice of assessment. It is common knowledge that real property is subject to assessment and taxation and it is the duty of every property owner to take such steps as are necessary to protect his or her interests in the property. One of the steps that courts generally assume a prudent property owner takes is to have someone either watch or manage the property while the property owner is away from the property for an extended period of time.

It is the responsibility of the property owner to assure that the taxing authority has the correct address to which notices relating to assessments and taxes on the property may be sent in order that the property owner will receive timely notice of assessments and tax levies affecting the property. Failure to receive an assessment notice because it was sent to an old address that the property owner had not corrected, or because the notice was sent to the property owner at the correct address but while the property owner was out of town, are not reasons that make the property owner “unable” to file a timely appeal.

With respect to an appeal filed after expiration of the 30-day appeal period, the Board should consider the oral and written evidence presented by the property owner on the question of whether or not the owner was “unable” to file the appeal within the required 30-day appeal period. If the property owner fails to prove that he or she was “unable” to file the appeal in a timely manner, there is no basis for hearing the appeal, even if the Board believes the assessment should be adjusted.

ASSESSMENTS THE BOARD CAN CONSIDER

The Board has authority to alter an assessment only when an appeal has been timely filed regarding the particular parcel. AS 29.45.200(b). The Board has no authority to alter the assessment of a parcel that is not before the Board on an appeal. Under state law, an appeal may be filed only by a person whose name appears on the assessment roll or the agent of that person. AS 29.45.190(a); CBJ 15.05.150.

If an appellant fails to appear at the hearing, the Board may proceed with the hearing in the absence of the appellant. AS 29.45.210(a); CBJ 15.05.190(b). The appellant may appear through an agent or representative, and may present written and/or oral testimony or other materials to the Board in support of the appeal.

BASIS FOR ADJUSTMENT AND ASSESSMENT

AS 29.45.210(b) and CBJ 15.05.190 expressly place the burden of proof on the party appealing the assessment. *CH Kelly Trust v. Municipality of Anchorage, Bd. of Equalization*, 909 P.2d 1381 (Alaska 1996) (“the burden is properly placed on the property owners in an assessment challenge”). Before the property owner is entitled to an adjustment, the property owner must prove, based on facts stated in the written appeal or presented at the hearing, that the property is the subject of unequal, excessive, improper, or under valuation. AS 29.45.210(b); CBJ 15.05.180(c). The appellant may present written evidence, oral testimony, and witnesses at the hearing.

Alaska courts do not disturb valuations set by the assessor if the differences between the appellant and the assessor are merely differences of opinion. Our court applies a “deferential standard of review” when considering an assessor’s property valuations. *Cool Homes, Inc. v. Fairbanks N. Star Borough*, 860 P.2d 1248, 1262 (Alaska 1993); *Fairbanks N. Star Borough v. Golden Heart Utilities, Inc.*, 13 P.3d 263, 267 (Alaska 2000). “AS 29.45.210(b) requires that the taxpayer prove *facts* at the hearing. ... It is not enough merely to argue that the valuation was inadequate or demand a justification from the taxing authority.” *Cool Homes, Inc.*, at 1263 (emphasis in original).

In *Twentieth Century Investment Co. v. City of Juneau*, 359 P.2d 783, 787 (Alaska 1961), the court, addressing assessment standards under former, similar law (AS 29.53.140), stated:

The valuation and assessment of property for taxes does not contravene [constitutional principles] unless it is plainly demonstrated that there is

involved, not the exercise of the taxing power, but the exertion of a different and forbidden power, such as the confiscation of property. *Such a demonstration is not made simply by showing overvaluation; there must be something which, in legal effect, is equivalent to an intention or fraudulent purpose to place an excessive valuation on property, and thus violate fundamental principles that safeguard the taxpayer's property rights.*

(Emphasis added.) The court went on to state, at 788:

The City was not bound by any particular formula, rule or method, either by statute or otherwise. Its choice of one recognized method of valuation over another was simply the exercise of a discretion committed to it by law. Whether or not it exercised a wise judgment is not our concern. This court has nothing to do with complaints of that nature. It will not substitute its judgment for the judgment of those upon whom the law confers the authority and duty to assess and levy taxes. *This court is concerned with nothing less than fraud or the clear adoption of a fundamentally wrong principle of valuation.* Neither has been shown here. The actions of the assessor and the Board of Equalization are entirely compatible with a sincere effort to adopt valuations not relatively unjust or unequal; their determinations have not transgressed the bounds of honest judgment.

(Emphasis added.) This principle, that “taxing authorities are to be given broad discretion in selecting valuation methods,” was reaffirmed in *CH Kelly Trust*, 909 P.2d at 1382, and *Golden Heart Utilities, Inc.*, 13 P.3d at 267 (“Provided the assessor has a reasonable basis for a valuation method, that method will be allowed ‘so long as there was no fraud or clear adoption of a fundamentally wrong principle of valuation.’”). Similarly, in *Cool Homes, Inc.*, 860 P.2d at 1262, the court held:

Taxing authorities are to be accorded broad discretion in deciding among recognized valuation methods. If a reasonable basis for the taxing agency's method exists, the taxpayer must show fraud or the ‘clear adoption of a fundamentally wrong principle of valuation.’

Thus, the assessor's valuations should be given substantial weight by the Board, particularly where the appellant offers little more than unsupported opinion that the assessor's value is too high. In order to be considered an unequal, excessive, improper, or under valuation, the valuation must be unequivocally excessive, or fundamentally wrong.

This assumes that the assessor has reviewed the critical facts. Our court requires the assessor to review all “directly relevant” evidence of the property value and “prevailing market conditions.” *Faulk v. Bd. of Equalization, Kenai Peninsula Borough*, 934 P.2d 750, 752 (Alaska 1997). Thus, it is important that the assessor, and the Board, make sure that all relevant evidence is considered.

FINDINGS – BASIS FOR THE BOARD’S DECISIONS

Board of Equalization decisions are subject to judicial review, if an appeal to superior court is filed within 30 days. Consequently, it is important for the Board to either make specific findings (statement of reasons) for its decisions, or otherwise set out sufficient information to enable a reviewing court to ascertain the reasons for the Board’s action. An appeal to superior court of a determination of the Board is heard on the record established at the Board hearing. AS 29.45.210(d). It is important that the record be as clear and complete as possible.

The Alaska Supreme Court outlined the requirements for board of equalization decisions in *Faulk*, 934 P.2d at 751, as follows:

We have previously concluded that “[t]he threshold question in an administrative appeal is whether the record sufficiently reflects the basis for the [agency’s] decision so as to enable meaningful judicial review.” *Fields v. Kodiak City Council*, 628 P.2d 927, 932 (Alaska 1981). In answering that question, “[t]he test of sufficiency is ... a functional one: do the [agency’s] findings facilitate this court’s review, assist the parties and restrain the agency within proper bounds?” *South Anchorage Concerned Coalition, Inc. v. Coffey*, 862 P.2d 168, 175 (Alaska 1993).

The court remanded the case to the borough board of equalization because the board had not provided an adequate basis for the court to determine whether it had reasonably denied the property tax appeal. The court directed: “On remand, the superior court should instruct the Board to state its reasons for rejecting the Faulks’ appeal.” *Id.* at 753.

Accordingly, the Board should take care to state its reasons for granting or denying an appeal, or making an adjustment to the assessment different from that requested by the appellant.

ACTION BY THE BOARD OF EQUALIZATION

In taking action on appeals, a Board member should move and vote in the affirmative to grant the appeal by the taxpayer. A Board member should vote in the negative to deny the appeal and thereby affirm the assessor's determination.

Sample motions: "I move that the Board grant the appeal and I ask for a 'yes' vote for the reasons provided by the appellant;" OR "I move the Board grant the appeal, and I ask for a 'no' vote for the reasons provided by the Assessor;" OR "I move the Board grant the appeal and I ask for a 'yes' vote to adjust the assessment to \$X for the following reasons [statement of reasons]."

For appeals that are not timely filed, the Board should first vote on whether or not to hear the appeal; if the Board decides to hear the appeal, it should then be heard on its merits.

The Board is required to certify its actions to the assessor within seven days, and, except as to supplementary assessments, the assessor must enter the changes and certify the final roll by June 1. AS 29.45.210(c). The rate of levy must be determined by the Assembly by ordinance before June 15. AS 29.45.240. The CBJ budget must be adopted by May 31. If for any reason the Board hearing is continued to a later date, the date for completing the hearing must be in the near future in order for the final assessment roll to be certified and the rate of levy fixed in accordance with the required statutory time frames.

Attachments

15.05.180 - Notice of hearing of appeal.

The assessor shall notify each appellant by mail of the date, time, and place of the hearing of the appeal by the board of equalization. Such notice shall be addressed to the appellant at the appellant's last known address as shown on the assessor's records, and shall be complete upon mailing. Such notices shall be mailed not later than ten days prior to the date of hearing of the appeals. All such notices shall include the following information:

- (a) The date and time of day of the hearing;
- (b) The location of the hearing room;
- (c) Notification that the appellant bears the burden of proof;
- (d) Notification that the only grounds for adjustment of assessment are proof of unequal, excessive, improper, or under valuation based on facts that are stated in a valid written appeal timely filed or proven at the appeal hearing; and
- (e) Notification that the appellant may be present at the hearing, and that if the appellant fails to appear, the board of equalization may proceed with the hearing in the absence of the appellant.

(CBJ Code 1970, § 15.05.180; Serial No. 70-33, § 3, 1971; Serial No. 87-36, § 2, 1987)

State law reference— Appeal, AS 29.45.190; appellant fails to appear, AS 29.45.210(a); grounds for adjustment, AS 29.45.210(b).

15.05.185 - Board of equalization.

(a) *Membership; duties; term of office; term limits.*

- (1) *Membership.* The board of equalization shall comprise a pool of no less than six, and up to nine, members, not assembly members, appointed by the assembly. There shall be up to three panels established each year. Each panel hearing appeals shall consist of three members. The board chair shall assign members to a specific panel and schedule the panels for a calendar of hearing dates. The assignment of members to panels and the establishment of a hearing calendar shall be done in consultation with the individual members. Additionally, members may be asked to take the place of regular assigned panel members in the event an assigned panel member is unable to attend a scheduled meeting.
- (2) *Qualifications of members.* Members shall be appointed on the basis of their general business expertise and their knowledge or experience with quasi-judicial proceedings. General business expertise may include, but is not limited to, real and personal property appraisal, the real estate market, the personal property market, and other similar fields.
- (3) *Duties.* The board, acting in panels, shall only hear appeals for relief from an alleged error in valuation on properties brought before the board by an appellant. A panel hearing a case must first make a determination that an error in valuation has occurred. Following the determination of an error in valuation the panel may alter an assessment of property only if there is sufficient evidence of value in the record. Lacking sufficient evidence on the record the case shall be remanded to the assessor for reconsideration. A hearing by the board may be conducted only pursuant to an appeal filed by the owner of the property as to the particular property.
- (4) *Term of office.* Terms of office shall be for three years and shall be staggered so that approximately one-third of the terms shall expire each year.
- (5) *Term limits.* No member of the board of equalization who has served for three consecutive terms or nine years shall again be eligible for appointment until one full year has intervened,

provided, however, that this restriction shall not apply if there are no other qualified applicants at the time reappointment is considered by the assembly human resources committee.

- (b) *Chair.* The board annually shall elect a member to serve as its chair. The chair shall coordinate all board activities with the assessor including assignment of panel members, scheduling of meetings, and other such board activities.
- (c) *Presiding officer.* Each panel shall elect its own presiding officer to act as the chair for the panel and shall exercise such control over meetings as to ensure the fair and orderly resolution of appeals. In the absence of the elected presiding officer the panel shall appoint a temporary presiding officer at the beginning of a regular meeting. The presiding officer shall make rulings on the admissibility of evidence and shall conduct the proceedings of the panel in conformity with this chapter and with other applicable federal, state and municipal law.
- (d) *Report to the assembly.* The board, through its chair, shall submit an independent report to the assembly each year by September 15 identifying, at a minimum, the number of cases appealed, the number of cases scheduled to be heard by the board, the number of cases actually heard, the percentage of cases where an error of valuation was determined to exist, the number of cases remanded to the assessor for reconsideration, the number of cases resulting in the board altering a property assessment, and the net change to taxable property caused by board action. The report shall also include any comments and recommendations the board wishes to offer concerning changes to property assessment and appeals processes.

(Serial No. 2005-51(c)(am), § 4, 1-30-2006)

15.05.190 - Hearing of appeal.

- (a) At the hearing of the appeal, the board of equalization shall hear the appellant, the assessor, other parties to the appeal, and witnesses, and consider the testimony and evidence, and shall determine the matters in question on the merits.
- (b) If a party to whom notice was mailed as provided in this title fails to appear, the board of equalization may proceed with the hearing in the party's absence.
- (c) The burden of proof in all cases is upon the party appealing.
- (d) The board of equalization shall maintain a record of appeals brought before it, enter its decisions therein and certify to them. The minutes of the board of equalization shall be the record of appeals unless the board of equalization shall provide for a separate record.

(CBJ Code 1970, § 15.05.190; Serial No. 70-33, § 3, 1971)

State law reference— Hearing, AS 29.45.210.

15.05.200 - Judicial review.

A person aggrieved by an order of the board of equalization may appeal to the superior court for review de novo after exhausting administrative remedy under this title.

(CBJ Code 1970, § 15.05.200; Serial No. 70-33, § 3, 1971)

State law reference— Appeal to superior court, AS 29.45.210(d).

C

West's Alaska Statutes Annotated Currentness

Title 29. Municipal Government

▣ Chapter 45. Municipal Taxation

▣ Article 1. Municipal Property Tax

→→ § 29. 45. 190. Appeal

(a) A person whose name appears on the assessment roll or the agent or assigns of that person may appeal to the board of equalization for relief from an alleged error in valuation not adjusted by the assessor to the taxpayer's satisfaction.

(b) The appellant shall, within 30 days after the date of mailing of notice of assessment, submit to the assessor a written appeal specifying grounds in the form that the board of equalization may require. Otherwise, the right of appeal ceases unless the board of equalization finds that the taxpayer was unable to comply.

(c) The assessor shall notify an appellant by mail of the time and place of hearing.

(d) The assessor shall prepare for use by the board of equalization a summary of assessment data relating to each assessment that is appealed.

(e) A city in a borough may appeal an assessment to the borough board of equalization in the same manner as a taxpayer. Within five days after receipt of the appeal, the assessor shall notify the person whose property assessment is being appealed by the city.

CREDIT(S)

SLA 1985, ch. 74, § 12.

LIBRARY REFERENCES

Taxation 🔑 2648.

Westlaw Key Number Search: 371k2648.

NOTES OF DECISIONS

Decisions reviewable and right of review 1

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C

West's Alaska Statutes Annotated Currentness

Title 29. Municipal Government

▣ Chapter 45. Municipal Taxation

▣ Article 1. Municipal Property Tax

→→ § 29. 45. 200. Board of equalization

(a) The governing body sits as a board of equalization for the purpose of hearing an appeal from a determination of the assessor, or it may delegate this authority to one or more boards appointed by it. An appointed board may be composed of not less than three persons, who shall be members of the governing body, municipal residents, or a combination of members of the governing body and residents. The governing body shall by ordinance establish the qualifications for membership.

(b) The board of equalization is governed in its proceedings by rules adopted by ordinance that are consistent with general rules of administrative procedure. The board may alter an assessment of a lot only pursuant to an appeal filed as to the particular lot.

(c) Notwithstanding other provisions in this section, a determination of the assessor as to whether property is taxable under law may be appealed directly to the superior court.

CREDIT(S)

SLA 1985, ch. 74, § 12.

LIBRARY REFERENCES

Taxation ⚙ 2624.

Westlaw Key Number Search: 371k2624.

NOTES OF DECISIONS

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West's Alaska Statutes Annotated Currentness

Title 29. Municipal Government

▣ Chapter 45. Municipal Taxation

▣ Article 1. Municipal Property Tax

→→ § 29. 45. 210. Hearing

(a) If an appellant fails to appear, the board of equalization may proceed with the hearing in the absence of the appellant.

(b) The appellant bears the burden of proof. The only grounds for adjustment of assessment are proof of unequal, excessive, improper, or under valuation based on facts that are stated in a valid written appeal or proven at the appeal hearing. If a valuation is found to be too low, the board of equalization may raise the assessment.

(c) The board of equalization shall certify its actions to the assessor within seven days. Except as to supplementary assessments, the assessor shall enter the changes and certify the final assessment roll by June 1.

(d) An appellant or the assessor may appeal a determination of the board of equalization to the superior court as provided by rules of court applicable to appeals from the decisions of administrative agencies. Appeals are heard on the record established at the hearing before the board of equalization.

CREDIT(S)

SLA 1985, ch. 74, § 12.

LIBRARY REFERENCES

Taxation ☞ 2676, 2691.

Westlaw Key Number Searches: 371k2676; 371k2691.

NOTES OF DECISIONS

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Record of hearing 2

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