

Assessment Consultants Targeted

By Michael Slackman

STAFF WRITER

Three Suffolk County lawmakers have proposed regulating the burgeoning industry of consultants who help homeowners challenge their property assessments, saying many defraud consumers with false promises and outrageous fees.

It was almost inevitable, officials said, that lawmakers would eventually reach out to control assessment consultants who in recent years have swamped town assessors' offices with assessment challenges and left consumers confused over their options for seeking lower tax bills.

The bipartisan coalition of legislators, Michael D'Andre (R-St. James), David Bishop (D-Lindenhurst) and Joseph Rizzo (R-Islip Terrace), yesterday filed the proposal, which seeks to limit the amount consultants can charge to

Scams abound, lawmakers say

one-third of one-year's tax reduction and to require they be licensed. It exempts lawyers and real estate appraisers, who theoretically are already governed by oversight agencies. Public hearings on the measure are scheduled for September.

"While many of these consultants are reputable, far too many are fly-by-night rip-off artists," Bishop said at a press conference in Hauppauge yesterday morning.

Even with the hearings months away, and the proposal a long way from becoming law, the debate has already grown acrimonious. Paul Henry, a founding member of the Association of Assessment Consultants Inc., on Long Island, an industry group, said his organization supports uniform standards

for the industry, but opposes having fees regulated and says the lawmakers' comments impugn their reputations.

"I would like to know if this guy Bishop can substantiate what he said," Henry said. "Maybe he would like to speak to any one of my 4,000 clients who have finally had their taxes reduced after so many years."

In recent years, consulting services have become increasingly popular on Long Island as homeowners try to lower their tax bills by challenging their assessments. The cottage industry has attracted the attention of lawmakers because some of its members use aggressive marketing tactics and in some cases charge outrageous fees for doing little or no work, officials said.

"This is a dirty business," said Bishop,

who told of a constituent who was solicited by a consultant with a flyer that read: "As you know, we are filing your grievance this year." The constituent had never even heard of the company, he said.

If it makes it into law, the measure would among other things require that consultants pay a \$500 application fee for a two-year license — and then a \$300 renewal fee every three years. It also would mandate that all refunds be sent to the client, not the consultant, and would bar consultants from claiming there is no other way to file a challenge. Homeowners can make the filing on their own. Violation of the law could result in a fine up to \$1,000 and 1 year in jail.

"We are trying to protect the victims, who are usually hard-pressed taxpayers." said D'Andre