

Grievance Day Draws 262 Grievors

By Ruth Jernick

SOUTHOLD—Two hundred sixty-two town residents and businesspersons filed grievances last Tuesday seeking reductions of from 10 to 40 percent in the assessed valuation of their properties.

And that number was fairly constant with a similar turnout last May, according to Board of Assessors chairman Scott Russell.

The only difference in 1992 was that far fewer people traveled to Town Hall to plead their cases in person. "That might be the result of these professional tax-reduction businesses," Mr. Russell said. "We have quite a few of them."

Greenport tax buster Paul Henry, who owns and operates Tax Reduction

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Southold Town tax assessor

Services, confirmed on Tuesday that he submitted about 70 grievances in Southold Town this year.

And Mr. Henry noted that he expects great success in attaining reductions for his clients. "I'm delighted and very pleased that they're going to be adjusting market values," Mr. Henry said of the town assessors and Board of Assessment Review. "I feel there is a

major transition in the position they're taking on inequity. They used to assess on bricks and mortar, which is antiquated. Now, they are starting to consider appraisals and recent sales and adjust assessments accordingly."

To Mr. Russell, however, assessment in Southold Town remains "business as usual," he said. "I'm delighted that Paul's delighted, but he perceives a metamorphosis that is not there."

The only difference this year is a decrease in assessment on recent sales because the real estate market remains in a downturn, said Mr. Russell. Houses assessed at \$200,000 may have been sold this year for far less than that amount and a case could thereby be made for reducing the assessment.

Sitting and Waiting

No decisions have yet been made on any grievances filed last week, and some commercial grievances could take as long as five years to be resolved, according to Mr. Russell. Of the approxi-

mately 250 grievances filed last year, "about 33 were approved and that resulted in an average tax reduction of less than \$150 to \$250 in total taxes," he added. "The rest were either denied or—in the case of commercial properties—passed on to certiorari court. A lot are not settled yet."

And Mr. Russell struck out at the tax-reduction firms that solicit clients by offering to present grievances for a fee. "People don't have to have them in Southold," he said. "In general, they're clever opportunists taking advantage of a declining market. You didn't see them in 1987 when the market was healthy, and you won't see them when the market is healthy again."

Town property owners should "make it their first order of business to see the assessor and see what can be done," said Mr. Russell. "Their first stop should be here. They have nothing to lose."

But that is a contention Mr. Henry

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—Paul Henry,
Tax Reduction Services

disputes. "Most of my clients didn't even know they were overassessed, and they never even heard of the grievance process," he said.

Mr. Henry researches the assessment rolls and then contacts potential clients, he explained. "That's really why the assessors are so displeased with my service. They would much rather these people be left sleeping."