

Grievance Process 2nd Round

With the passing of Grievance Day last Tuesday, the annual review of property owners' petitions seeking assessment reductions, and lower taxes, is now in the hands of each town's grievance board.

Many towns will have more work to do this year, thanks in part to the recent emergence of tax grievance consultants. Drawing criticism from assessors who say the companies are taking unfair advantage of declining real estate values, and in winning reductions for some are adding to tax roll inequities, the firms nonetheless have made their presence known in Town Halls throughout Suffolk.

Greenport-based Tax Reduction Services Inc. filed about 650 grievances in all ten Suffolk towns and Nassau County last week, said President Paul Henry. Of those, 78 were brought in Southold, 71 in Riverhead.

The 264 grievances filed in Southold this year are not significantly higher than last year's figure. There were considerably more challenges brought in Riverhead, where the number rose from 371 last year to 433.

"From past experience, we don't expect the Grievance Boards to give us the reductions we seek," said Henry, adding that most will be determined in Small Claims Assessment Review courts.

A Policy Shift?

Henry contends that the Town of Southold changed its assessment practices this year, and for the first time is granting reductions based on market values.

A number of downward adjustments were made in Southold during last Tuesday's grievance hearings, said Henry.

"In the past they were using different criteria, and it's to their credit that they are starting to address the real issues," Henry said. "There's a change of tune out there, especially in Southold. I think the Grievance Board and assessors are adjusting their criteria in accordance with fairness and the law. I think that's terrific."

Grievance

Continued from Page 3

Rather than filling the board's hearing agenda on Tuesday, Henry met with Southold's Grievance Board and assessors for eight hours on Thursday.

Scott Russell, chairman of Southold's Board of Assessors, disagrees with Henry, and said there has been no policy change.

"We assess all properties equally," said Russell. "In some cases we couldn't defend the assessment because of recent sales in a depressed market. It's simply taking the best we can get."

This year "is like any other year, ex-

cept that I have to go to 71 hearings with Mr. Henry," said Riverhead Assessor Leroy Barnes. "If you're going to spend your whole year litigating cases, you're going to become a gun-shy assessor and put lower values on property than you want to."

Barnes believes the only way to assure uniformity in assessing practices is for each town in the state to switch to full value assessment, as did Riverhead in 1980.

Fractional assessment, he said, "is a very confusing way of levying taxes. If all towns were at 100 percent, there would be no disputes and no disparities."

—Tim Kelly

Continued on Page 19