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Riverhead Town Assessor

The Issue Was Copies

*'Mr. Grievance' protests
filing forms in triplicate*

RIVERHEAD—Property tax grievances were filed by 363 people in Riverhead Tuesday, but none of them were more aggrieved than Paul Henry.

Mr. Henry, who owns Tax Reduction Services in Greenport, accused the Riverhead assessors of taking "it upon themselves to harass and intimidate not only myself, my company and my employees, but my customers as well."

Mr. Henry made his comments Tuesday afternoon before the Board of Assessment Review while the town's three elected assessors looked on poker-faced.

Mr. Henry claims that the assessors office tried to illegally deny his employee the right to file 26 petitions on behalf of his clients because they were not presented in triplicate. Tuesday was the official Grievance Day across the state, the last day of the fiscal year for property owners to submit written or verbal arguments to the three-member assessment review board that their property tax assessments are too high, outdated or just plain wrong.

"We were told that they had to be filed in triplicate and were told to go home," Mr. Henry told the board. "I'm not in the business of doing their clerical work."

Mr. Henry said he called and offered to send the copies of the forms, but withdrew that offer after consulting with his lawyer and learning that state law does not require forms to be submitted in triplicate.

"It's a matter of procedure," said Leroy Barnes, chairman of Riverhead's Board of Assessors. "Every attorney — every individual — submits their forms in triplicate. There's not one person who refuses to do this, but he has to grandstand and make a big deal about this. I'm not here to do his clerical work."

Mr. Barnes said he had not yet determined Wednesday morning who in his office spoke to Mr. Henry or what was said. The Board of Assessment Review finally accepted Mr. Henry's grievances, with chairman Richard Spanburgh noting that the board was "not attesting to the validity of the statements therein."

Henry: Forget Comparables

Mr. Henry was asked, as was an 85-year-old woman who had moments before sought a reduction of the assessment on her bungalow, if he had provided assessments of comparable properties upon which the board could base its judgment. Mr. Henry refused to answer the question, but after leaving the board room told a reporter that he never provides comparables.

"They're meaningless," he said. "It's comparing one overassessed house to another overassessed house."

The board is reviewing 46 residential grievances this year, including Mr. Henry's 26. The board must render decisions on all of the cases before July 1.