

Richland County property owners late paying taxes

Delinquencies rise 35 percent in Richland County

The State Newspaper

Posted on October 16, 2008

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The Richland County treasurer is seeing a 35 percent spike in delinquent property taxes this year — many involving homeowners.

"I'm scared for people," said Treasurer David Adams, who attributed the increase to property owners "holding their breath" in hopes the economy will improve.

Of the 4,200 parcels to be sold Nov. 3 to cover back taxes, one-third are owner-occupied homes.

Many of the remainder are owned by investors who have rental property or raw land, Adams said.

"I have started to hear from people who are having trouble borrowing money to pay their taxes," Adams said.



Treasurer Adams assists taxpayers to locate the Delinquent Tax Department.

The increase in the tax delinquencies is the latest sign of how the credit crunch and weakening economy is affecting property owners.

Last year at this time, Adams said the county had 3,100 delinquent property owners. He did not know how many were homeowners.

But the troubling news is not shared in Lexington or Kershaw counties, where officials said delinquent-tax numbers are only slightly higher this year.

And advocates for the elderly say they are not hearing from people worried about losing their homes. Some acknowledged that failing to pay taxes may be considered “shameful” among that generation of clients, so they might not talk about it.

“They may actually cut back on other things in order to have that property tax bill” paid, said Jackie Thompson, a social worker with the Area Agency on Aging.

The overwhelming majority of people who own the 164,300 parcels of land, homes and businesses in Richland County paid their taxes on time. But those who didn’t have owed local governments \$6.8 million since January.

The money will be recovered at the tax sale, so the higher-than-normal number of delinquent taxpayers shouldn’t cause a budget shortfall for local government.

At the Lexington County treasurer’s office, Gene Rishkofski said he’s seeing “a slight increase, but not significant” numbers of tax bills going unpaid.

He is expecting an increase of perhaps 200 delinquent parcels to the 900 to 1,000 properties that typically are sold at Lexington’s tax sale.

In Kershaw County, Treasurer Steve Vincent said he’s looking at 850 delinquent bills this year.

“It might be up by 100, but we’ve still got two weeks” for people to pay their taxes before the November sale, he noted.

Richland’s treasurer said he stopped accepting credit-card payment of property taxes at the end of September, but has decided to reconsider.

Property owners have a year after the tax sale to settle up with the county — and most do.

But to redeem their property, they also must pay interest to whomever bid on their parcel, pushing the bill higher than the original taxes.

Using the past as a measure, fewer than 150 pieces of property will actually change hands a year after the tax sale.

“I think a lot of people are holding their breath just to see if things change,” he said.

Adams said his office will be passing the word among churches, community groups and business organizations that the county again will allow people to make monthly payments on their 2008 tax bills, which will arrive in the mail in mid-November and come due in mid-January. But that policy does not extend to back taxes.

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