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Pennsylvania – Reassessment in Allegheny County

By Bob Mellinger, Cincinnati

THE PENNSYLVANIA SUPREME COURT RULED IN EARLY MAY THAT ALLEGHENY COUNTY must conduct a property tax reassessment next year. It stopped short of saying the county's base-year assessment system is illegal, so other counties around the state will not necessarily have to stop using it.

The Supreme Court decision comes in response to a June 2007 ruling by Allegheny County Court Judge R. Stanton Wettick Jr. He said the base-year system "guarantees unfairness and punishes owners of lower-priced properties."

BUSINESSES WELCOME REASSESSMENT

Many commercial property owners feel a revaluation could be more beneficial than keeping the status quo. That's because with the economic downturn, assessments may not properly reflect the current downturn in the real estate market.

The system discriminates against owners who purchase a commercial property that declines in value and loses tenants after the sale. Without a reassessment, the owner is restricted in filing a new appeal.

REASSESSMENT CHALLENGED

The Supreme Court ordered Judge Wettick to take control of this case and determine a realistic timetable for reassessing properties for the 2010 tax year. However, Allegheny County Executive Dan Onorato is vowing to do everything in his power to prevent a countywide reassessment.

Onorato plans to lobby the Pennsylvania Legislature for a statewide solution to the problems associated with base-year assessments. If the legislature fails to act, he says he will consider filing a federal lawsuit under the 14th Amendment's "equal protection" clause.