



Why Your Property Taxes Change from Year to Year

Minnesota has a complicated property tax system. The following answers to frequently asked questions are designed to help you understand the “what,” “when,” “why,” and “how” of the Minnesota property tax system.

What makes my property tax bill change from year to year?

- a. My property’s value
- b. My neighbor’s property value
- c. My city council, my county board, and my school board
- d. The state Legislature
- e. All of the above

The answer is E—all of the above. The decisions of your city council, county board, and school board about the amount of tax dollars they need to deliver services may be the most obvious factor in your property tax bill. But the value of your property, the total value of all the property in your community, changes in state programs, and changes in state laws that affect the tax system also play a role. Changes in any of these factors can make your tax bill go up in some years and down in others.

Some of the local news coverage talks about city budgets and other coverage talks about city levies. Are they the same thing?

The property tax levy is the amount of money that the city (or other local government) decides it needs to collect from property owners in order to deliver services. Property taxes, however, are just part of the overall city budget. The budget includes both discretionary spending (for services the city is free to choose to provide) and non-discretionary spending (to meet obligations such as paying off debt). The budget includes all the dollars that the city collects from various sources—fees, grants, revenue sharing, and property taxes.

What governments collect property taxes?

Your property tax bill is a total of taxes owed to several local governments and, for some types of property, to the state. Cities, counties, school districts, and townships are separate governments. They all collect money through the property tax in order to provide services. Special districts, like watershed districts, also collect property taxes, but those taxes are usually a very small part of the total bill. The state collects property taxes from business property and seasonal/recreational property such as cabins.

What do I get for my property taxes?

Local governments get the money they use to deliver services from a few different sources: property taxes, fees, revenue sharing with the state, and grants. Property tax dollars pay for the services that everyone in the community—as well as visitors, commuters, and tourists—can access. This includes things like streets, police and fire services, parks, and libraries. Other services—like economic development programs to help businesses grow and develop, snowplowing, garbage removal, and recycling are also typically paid for with property tax dollars.

Why does my tax bill come from the county?

For efficiency, counties have been designated by the state Legislature to administer most aspects of the property tax system on behalf of all local governments. County staff calculate the tax bills for each property in the community and then collect tax payments from property owners. After your property taxes are paid, the county then properly distributes the money to the various local governments and to the state.

When do I pay my property taxes?

Most property owners pay their taxes in two installments—the first half in May and the second half in October. This semi-annual payment occurs even if your property taxes are collected by your mortgage company with your monthly mortgage payment.

I get several property tax statements each year. How do I make sense of them?

Generally, three statements are sent to property owners each year: one in November, and two statements generally in March or April. The November statement shows you the amount of taxes local governments are proposing to collect in the following year. It will include an estimate of what your tax bill will be. Local governments can decrease the amount of taxes they will collect as they finalize their budgets, but they cannot increase the amount after this notice goes out, except in very limited circumstances such as natural disasters.

The second notice that you receive generally in March or April is a notice of the estimated value of your property and the property's "use" classification (e.g., homestead, apartment, commercial, etc.), which is also known as the property assessment. All property is valued at its market value and classified according to its use on Jan. 2 of each year. Any improvements or destruction made to a property after Jan. 2 will be evaluated for the following year's assessment.

The valuation of your property provided on the annual valuation notice is not used to compute your property taxes until the next calendar year. So, the spring 2014 valuation notice will be used for taxes payable in 2015. This is because all property owners have the right to challenge the valuation of the property. Information on how to contest a property's valuation is contained on the valuation notice.

When does my tax bill come?

The third notice, generally received in March of each year, is the actual tax bill. It will show what you owe in property taxes to each local government—your county, city or township, school district, any special district, and the state. Some local governments will also include information about the kinds of services that the property tax dollars will support.

There is something labeled “homestead exclusion” on my tax statement. What is that?

A relatively new state program excludes some of the value of many residential homesteads from property taxes, meaning taxes are not paid on that portion. The statement will show you how much of the assessed value of your homestead is excluded from taxation.

If I make an improvement or addition to my house, will I pay more in property taxes?

In some cases, yes, but not necessarily. The change in your tax bill depends on a lot of factors other than changes in the value of your home. It is also affected by things like whether all the properties in the city taken together (tax base) grow or shrink in value, whether the local governments collect more or less money in property tax, and changes to the tax system state lawmakers make. For example, let’s say you add a bedroom to your home, and its value increases by \$20,000. If local governments don’t change how much property tax they need to collect and the rest of the tax base is unchanged, then you will pay more in property tax because your property is now a bigger piece of the pie. But if the tax base as a whole increases in value—maybe a new development was built—then your piece of the pie may not be bigger and you may not pay more in tax.

How does the city—or any local government—decide what services to provide?

City councils review the services they currently provide and think about what local preferences are and what population trends suggest about the kinds of services people will need. For example, one community might favor running its own pool while another does not see the need. Communities with lots of young families need to offer different kinds of services than communities seeing big increases in the number of senior residents. Sometimes cities have to provide certain services in order to comply with state or federal laws. Some common examples are requirements for testing drinking water and making public buildings accessible to people with disabilities.

How does the city decide how much to collect in property taxes?

Cities look at their costs—like gasoline, road salt, salaries, and building repairs. They also determine the amount of money the city needs to provide the services residents expect and depend on. Councils then examine the dollars coming into the city from other sources—like fees people pay to use the recreation center or to license their dogs, grants from state and federal governments, and state revenue sharing. Property taxes make up the gap between money coming in from non-tax sources and the money needed to run the city. Other local governments (e.g., counties, schools) go through a similar process to set their property tax amounts.

Last year, the taxes I had to pay to the county and school district were lower, but the taxes I had to pay to the city stayed about the same. Why did that happen?

One of the factors that affects whether your tax bill goes up or down is the change in value of all property within the taxing jurisdiction. In recent years, the value of farm property has grown significantly faster than that of other kinds of property such as residential homes and businesses. The property taxes collected by the county and the school districts are collected from a larger geographical area that includes many more farms than are the taxes collected by the city. That means the county and school district taxes get spread across a bigger tax base when those farm values increase, and your share of the tax pie for county and school district property tax shrinks. Your share of the city tax pie, though, may remain about the same.

Are property taxes the only way that the city takes in money?

Cities have several sources of revenue, but the two largest sources are property taxes and state revenue sharing. Property taxes are collected from the owners of homes, businesses, and farms within the city. State aid dollars, such as local government aid and municipal state aid for roads, are funded by the sales taxes, income taxes, and gas taxes that we all pay to the state. Some of those dollars are redistributed to cities through revenue sharing.

Cities also get money from a few other sources. One source of revenue is fees. Some examples of common fees that people pay to cities are for: dog licenses, building permits, use of the community pool, fines for failure to remove snow from the sidewalk, and water and sewer services. Cities also get some money from grants. These come from the state or federal government and are used for very specific purposes such as a building improvement.

How does the state affect my property taxes?

State law spells out all aspects of the property tax system. All properties within cities are classified as one of more than 50 types according to the system set by state policymakers. Property types include home, commercial, apartment building, farm, bed and breakfast, railroad, and duplex. Each property type is assigned a classification rate. This indicates what portion of the property's value is taxable.

The state also implements programs, such as fiscal disparities and tax increment financing, that can affect tax bills. The fiscal disparities programs operate in the metro area and on the Iron Range. Through these programs, part of the tax dollars that cities collect are from the regional tax base. This shifts some of the tax burden. With tax increment financing, cities can finance public improvements over time with the tax dollars collected on new development such as an industrial park.

The state also imposes mandates that require cities and other local governments to do certain things. These mandates can increase costs for cities and counties. Many mandates are for good reasons, like the rules to maintain clean drinking water. But they do result in pressure on city budgets.

From time to time, the state Legislature has also imposed "levy limits" on larger cities and counties. In some cases, these limits can require cities and counties to reduce the amount of property tax dollars they collect.

How can I get help paying my property taxes?

The state has increased funding for direct property tax relief over the last few years. There are a few different programs through which property owners and renters can get help with their property taxes. These programs provide state-paid refunds for qualifying property owners. There is another program in which seniors can defer some of the property taxes that they owe.

Where can I learn more about the property tax system?

The League of Minnesota Cities offers several resources that explain the property tax system. They are available at www.lmc.org/property-tax.