

## Appeals surge on property taxes

Written by Jim Walsh and Sharon Mullen March 21, 2011

At Richard Cohn's Cherry Hill law office, the telephones are an economic indicator.

More and more, they're ringing with calls from people seeking to cut property taxes by appealing the assessed value of homes and other buildings.

"It's a lot more active," said Cohn, noting the volume of appeals has "at least doubled" in the past year at his firm, Earp Cohn.

"It started a year or two ago as real estate prices fell," he observed. "More and more people are becoming aware that they can get relief from their tax assessment."



Indeed, more than 74,000 property tax appeals were filed statewide last year, triple the amount in 2007.

In the tri-county area, filings jumped by more than 50 percent from 2008 to 2010 -- going from 1,594 to 2,888, state records show.

The largest number of appeals were in Burlington County - 1,486 last year, compared to 1,263 in 2008. But the increase was sharpest in Gloucester County, where appeals more than doubled from 661 in 2008 to 1,364 last year.

Camden County also saw a big jump, going from 670 to 1,238 in the same period.

Behind the upsurge: In a weak housing market, the actual value of many properties has dropped well below the level at which they're assessed for tax purposes. And the weak economy has motivated many people to cut costs wherever they can.

"When things are going well, people don't really think about their tax bill," said Cohn. "But now, when people are looking for ways to save money, they're saying, 'Here's an opportunity.'"

In Brielle, Monmouth County, Terri LaPoint has helped about 15 friends and neighbors navigate the property tax appeal system.

"People don't know they can do this. It's very easy," she said of appeals to the county Board of Taxation.

LaPoint said everyone she's helped so far has slashed their assessments by at least \$65,000. LaPoint lopped 20 percent off her own assessment, saving herself nearly \$1,500 in taxes.

Her advice: If you think you're over assessed, find out the sales price for comparable homes in your town. If the evidence is there, appeal.