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**PRESS
RELEASE**

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Don't Get Ripped Off!

*Official Looking Notice Mailed to San Mateo County Property Owners
Offering the Lure of Lower Taxes*

(Redwood City, CA) Property owners throughout California are the hoped-for customers of a number of private companies who are taking advantage of people during these economically uncertain times. Companies with clever names like "Tax Review" and "Tax Reassessment" and "Tax Adjusters" are soliciting fees of \$95, \$179, \$209 to file a homeowner's request for a Decline in Value review **for the 2009-10 Property Assessment.**

"The real estate market downturn has created some sharks — companies that are offering **services that are provided for free by all Assessors' Offices in California,**" explained Warren Slocum, San Mateo County Chief Elections Officer & Assessor - County Clerk - Recorder. Some notices are printed on legal size form that has the homeowner's name, address and property value information preprinted on the form. Others are printed on multi-page letter size paper. Solicitations include an "estimated tax savings" figure that cites hundred, if not, thousands of dollars, making the fee seem rather paltry. Some of the solicitations compel a property owner to mail their check before a February date to create a false sense of urgency. **The reality is that homeowners can request a Decline in Value review at any time and do so directly with the Office of the Assessor – for free.**

"Don't be misled into paying someone to file an application for you when we'll be reviewing your property for free," warned Slocum, "San Mateo County offers homeowners the ability to fill out an online Decline in Value form. The form takes about 2-3 minutes to

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complete and a few seconds to be delivered.” And it’s offered in English, Spanish and Chinese, depending on the language that you feel most comfortable using. The online Decline-in-Value form is accessible from the homepage of the web site, www.smcare.org.

Property owners can also go online and download and print a paper copy of the form if they prefer that method. They can fax, mail or hand deliver their request. All methods are accepted.

Once a homeowner submits a request, they will receive an email confirmation or phone call that advises them of a date when they can expect to learn of the status of their request.

If their request has merit, the property assessed value will be reduced. If the parties disagree, further discussions will take place to ensure that everything is understood. If the Decline in Value request is ultimately denied, the homeowner still has the option to file an appeal before the San Mateo County Assessment Appeals Board, an independent body appointed by the Board of Supervisors that rules on these matters.

Since June 2008, the San Mateo County Assessor’s Office has processed approximately 8,600 Decline-in-Value requests from homeowners for the **2008-09 Tax Year**; 5,200 of them were approved for a reduction in assessment. Those that were not reduced were generally for properties that were purchased in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. The same is also true for those that purchased a property in 2008; these will be reviewed for a possible Decline-in-Value as of the lien date Jan. 1, 2009 for the **2009-10 Tax Roll**.

However, once a property is enrolled in the Decline-in-Value Assessment Program, its assessed value is subject to annual review in subsequent years in light of the current economic and market factors. For example, the assessed value may be: 1) increased to no more than the “factored base year value” or 2) held at the prior year’s assessed value or 3) reduced further.

Calls have been pouring into the Assessor’s Office and the Tax Collector’s Office from homeowners who are confused by these notices. “It is unfortunate that some of the homeowners have already signed the form and mailed in their payment to these companies” explained Angelina Hunter, Deputy Assessor-County Clerk-Recorder.

Some of the firms offer to represent the homeowner before a Hearing Officer of the Clerk of the Board who decides the outcome of the formal appeal explaining that a homeowner need not appear themselves. Slocum thought it to be a highly unusual offer to travel from thousands of miles to represent a client before the Appeals Board for a minimal fee. “If something doesn’t sound right, chances are it isn’t right. People should trust their instincts,

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call us and check it out before they send anyone money for these services.”

Particularly susceptible to this kind of solicitation are first generation immigrants, brand new homeowners and widows who left financial matters to their spouses – all for the very same reason, they are unfamiliar with property taxes, property tax programs and assessments. “The sad part is that often the people preyed upon are the most vulnerable and at-risk property owners who would most benefit from a homeowner’s exemption,” said Slocum.

Property owners are encouraged to contact the Assessor’s Office to find out if they have questions or need help in filling out the Decline-in-Value form. Online forms are available in English, Spanish and Chinese from the homepage of www.smcare.org. Property owners can call (650) 363-4500 for assistance.

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