

GUEST OPINION: TERESA K. WATTS

Double homestead exemptions not so easy any more

I have noticed comments in the Mailbag that infer that it is "easy" to receive double homestead exemptions in the State of Florida.

The two situations that are typically discussed are: 1) Someone obtaining a homestead exemption in Florida while concurrently receiving a residency-based exemption, rollback or tax credit in another state and 2) Married couples claiming that they are two separate family units and claiming two residency based exemptions either both in Florida or in Florida as well as another state. Both situations violate Section 6(b) Article VII of the Constitution of the State of Florida and are punishable by law.

Although I agree that it might have been a bit easier in the past to

slip through the cracks in the system, the "times they are a changing." So, while it once might have been easy to have a double homestead exemption and get away with it, it might not be quite so easy today.

The Lee County Property Appraiser's Office has made great strides in the area of homestead exemption compliance as more and more resources have become available to us. Access to the worldwide Web makes pertinent verification information such as DMV, address, voter's registration information and other governmentally gathered information just fingertips away. Additionally, we have consciously made great strides in beefing up our existing tools: We have created

a new homestead form that asks for more detailed information, which makes it easier for us to research any conflicts in application information.

Also, applicants must sign an affidavit that specifically addresses any out-of-state benefits they might have. We have created a Homestead Fraud hotline which allows suspect homestead exemptions to be reported anonymously via our Website (www.leepa.org), by telephone at (239) 533-6299, by letter or in person, and we now send out periodic mailings that ask for updated information for record verification that brings our older information up to today's standards.

Many situations have been reported to us through our fraud

hotline that appeared on the surface to violate the homestead law but they did not in actuality. However, any homestead abuse cases that do indeed appear to have been intentionally and fraudulently committed are forwarded by this office to the State Attorney's Office for further investigation and prosecution.

The homestead exemption and the "Save Our Homes" cap are a couple of the benefits of owning a home in Florida if you are a permanent resident, but, only one to a customer, please.

— Teresa K. Watts is the Tax Roll Administrator for the Lee County Property Appraiser's Office.