

INDIANA BOARD OF TAX REVIEW
Small Claims
Final Determination
Findings and Conclusions

Petition: 45-004-17-1-5-01052-18
Petitioner: James Nowacki
Respondent: Lake County Assessor
Parcel: 45-08-08-183-024.000-004
Assessment Year: 2017

The Indiana Board of Tax Review (“Board”) issues this determination, finding and concluding as follows:

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

1. Nowacki contested the 2017 assessment of his property located at 2540 W. 15th Avenue in Gary. The Lake County Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals (“PTABOA”) issued its determination valuing the vacant platted lot at \$14,500.
2. Nowacki filed a Form 131 petition with the Board and elected to proceed under our small claims procedures. On September 13, 2021, Ellen Yuhan, our designated Administrative Law Judge (“ALJ”) held a hearing on Nowacki’s petition. Neither she nor the Board inspected the property.
3. Nowacki appeared pro se. The Assessor appeared by Hearing Officer Robert Metz. Nowacki and Metz testified under oath.

RECORD

4. The official record for this matter contains the following:
 - a. Petitioner Exhibit A: GIS map
Petitioner Exhibit B: Property Record Card (2008-2012)
Petitioner Exhibit C: Property Record Card (2012-2016)
Petitioner Exhibit D: Property Record Card (2016-2020)
 - b. The record for the matter also includes the following: (1) all pleadings, briefs, motions, and documents filed in this appeal; (2) all notices and orders issued by the Board or our ALJ; and (3) an audio recording of the hearing.

BURDEN OF PROOF

5. Generally, a taxpayer seeking review of an assessing official's determination has the burden of proof. Indiana Code § 6-1.1-15-17.2 creates an exception to that general rule and assigns the burden of proof to the assessor in two circumstances—where the assessment under appeal represents an increase of more than 5% over the prior year's assessment, or where it is above the level determined in a taxpayer's successful appeal of the prior year's assessment. I. C. § 6-1.1-15-17.2 (b) and (d).
6. Here, the property's assessment remained unchanged from 2016 to 2017. Nowacki therefore bears the burden of proof.

SUMMARY OF CONTENTIONS

7. Nowacki's case:
 - a. This property is a nice, almost ½ acre lot across from a park. In 2008, it was assessed at \$14,400. In, 2012, the Assessor reduced the assessment to \$5,800, almost a 60% decrease. In 2013, the Assessor increased the value to \$10,600 where it remained until 2016 when it increased to \$14,500. In 2019, the Assessor reduced the assessment to \$11,100, and then in 2020, she increased it to \$13,400. Real estate values do go up and down, but in no community do they jump around by factors of 60%, 70%, or 20% year after year. This defies anything in real estate and cannot happen, especially for vacant lots. The Assessor is simply pulling numbers out of the air. *Nowacki testimony; Pet'r Exs. B-D.*
 - b. Assessments should reflect fair market value. Fair market value is not determined by the auction price, but the auction price affects the value. In Calumet Township, the vast majority of transactions occur at the county sales. These properties churn through the system year after year, sometimes for 30 or 40 years, but that is not fairly reflected in the assessed valuations. Nowacki requests the value be reduced to \$7,200, which is the value he thinks he could sell it for on the market. He could not sell it for \$14,500, which is twice its market value. *Nowacki testimony.*
8. The Assessor's case:
 - a. Nowacki has not provided any substantial evidence to warrant a change in value. The Assessor recommends no change in the assessment. *Metz testimony.*

ANALYSIS

9. Nowacki failed to make a prima facie case for reducing the property's 2017 assessment. The Board reached this decision for the following reasons:

- a. The goal of Indiana's real property assessment system is to arrive at an assessment reflecting the property's true tax value. 50 IAC 2.4-1-1(c); 2021 REAL PROPERTY ASSESSMENT MANUAL at 2, 3. "True tax value" does not mean "fair market value" or "the value of the property to the user." I.C. § 6-1.1-31-6(c), (e). It is instead determined under the rules of the Department of Local Government Finance ("DLGF"). I.C. § 6-1.1-31-5(a); I.C. § 6-1.1-31-6(f). The DLGF defines "true tax value" as "market value in use," which it in turn defines as "[t]he market value-in-use of a property for its current use, as reflected by the utility received by the owner or by a similar user, from the property." MANUAL at 2.
- b. Evidence in an assessment appeal should be consistent with that standard. For example, market value-in-use appraisals that comply with the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice often will be probative. *Id. See also Kooshtard Prop. VI, LLC v. White River Twp. Ass'r*, 836 N.E.2d 501, 506 n.6 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2005). Cost or sales information for the property under appeal may also be used, as well as sales or assessment information for comparable properties, and any other information compiled according to generally accepted appraisal principles. *Id. See also* I.C. § 6-1.1-15-18 (allowing parties to offer evidence of comparable properties' assessments in property tax appeals but explaining that the determination of comparability must be made in accordance with generally accepted appraisal and assessment practices). Regardless of the type of valuation evidence used, a party must also relate its evidence to the relevant valuation date. *Long v. Wayne Twp. Ass'r*, 821 N.E.2d 466, 471 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2005). Otherwise, the evidence lacks probative value. *Id.* The valuation date for this appeal is January 1, 2017. Ind. Code § 6-1.1-2-1.5(a).
- c. Nowacki contends the 2017 assessment should be \$7,200, but he failed to present any probative market-based evidence to support that value. Statements that are unsupported by probative evidence are conclusory and of no value to the Board in making its determination. *Whitley Products, Inc. v. State Bd. of Tax Comm'rs*, 704 N.E.2d 1113, 1118 (Ind. Tax Ct. 1998). To successfully make a case for a lower assessment, a taxpayer must use market-based evidence to "demonstrate that their suggested value accurately reflects the property's true market value-in-use." *Eckerling v. Wayne Co. Ass'r*, 841 N.E. 2d 674, 678 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2006).
- d. We also give no weight to his claims regarding the property's fluctuating assessments. The Assessor's decision to increase or decrease the assessment in any given year does not prove that its 2017 assessment is incorrect. As the Tax Court has explained, each tax year and each appeal process stands alone. *Fisher v. Carroll Cnty Ass'r*, 74 N.E.3d 582, 588 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2017). Evidence of a property's assessment in one year, therefore, has little bearing on its true tax value in another. *Fleet Supply, Inc. v. State Bd. of Tax Comm'rs*, 747 N.E.2d 645, 650 (Ind. Tax Ct. 2001).
- e. Because Nowacki offered no probative market-based evidence to demonstrate the property's correct market value-in-use for 2017, he failed to make a prima facie case for a lower assessment.

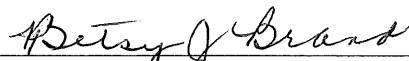
FINAL DETERMINATION

In accordance with the above findings of fact and conclusions of law, we find for the Assessor and order no change to the 2017 assessment.

ISSUED: 11/23/2021



Chairman, Indiana Board of Tax Review



Commissioner, Indiana Board of Tax Review



Commissioner, Indiana Board of Tax Review

- APPEAL RIGHTS -

You may petition for judicial review of this final determination under the provisions of Indiana Code § 6-1.1-15-5 and the Indiana Tax Court's rules. To initiate a proceeding for judicial review you must take the action required not later than forty-five (45) days after the date of this notice. The Indiana Code is available on the Internet at <<http://www.in.gov/legislative/ic/code>>. The Indiana Tax Court's rules are available at <<http://www.in.gov/judiciary/rules/tax/index.html>>.