

Payback time for Tahoe

North Shore residents could get total of \$40M in tax refunds

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The Nevada Supreme Court ended a nine-year property tax dispute between 8,700 North Lake Tahoe residents and Washoe County on Thursday, saying homeowners in Incline Village and Crystal Bay are due a property tax refund.

While estimates of the refund came out to about \$13 million in 2009, with interest county officials are now estimating they could owe the residents up to \$40 million, impacting the Washoe County School District, North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District, Incline Village General Improvement District and the state.

The high court on Thursday knocked down the county's appeal of a 2009 district court decision that agreed with a series of previous tax panel decisions that said the 8,700 residents paid too much in property taxes in 2006-07 and should have paid at 2002-03 levels.

Thursday's decision was the culmination of nine years of legal battles between the Village League to Save Incline Assets and Washoe County after residents complained their properties had been improperly assessed. Maryanne Ingemanson, president of the organization, said former County Assessor Bob McGowan had evaluated their properties based on things like their view of the lake without getting an OK from the state to do so.

"I saw it in the beginning and felt it was wrong," she said. "I spoke with the assessor at the time and was effectively told to go pound

sand. So I said OK, game on. Nine years later we effectively achieved our goal."

After eliminating 20 percent of its staff and losing \$154 million over the last five years, Washoe County was already facing a \$33.8 million shortfall before Thursday's decision.

Washoe County Finance Director John Sherman said because the county is running low on funds it may look to taxing unaffected Washoe County property owners to cover the refund if general funds are not available.

"At this time we are reviewing the written Supreme Court's decision to evaluate its impact upon all Washoe County taxpayers," said David Creekman, Washoe County assistant deputy district attorney.

County commissioners will meet next week to begin discussing the matter.

From here, the 8,700 North Shore residents who paid property taxes in 2006-07 will have to be tracked down before the county can start sending out checks.

Ultimately, Ingemanson said Thursday's decision leveled the playing field for all homeowners in Incline Village and Crystal Bay, giving them an outcome usually only afforded by those who have the legal know-how and money to fight their property tax battles alone.

"This is what we were trying to do from the beginning to make it equal for everyone and this is what this case does," she said.

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