# Assessments of Property Poses Tough Problems

By VINCENT THOMAS
Assemblyman

A persistent problem which has plagued your Legisuature for many years is the matter of assessing private property for local tax purposes. It's been a headache pratically ever since our State was admitted to the Union. Despite major reworking of assessment and tax law on the average of once every generation, the snarl between state and local assessment is still with us. A joint interim committee on assessment practices is again studying the matter, and has been given enough qualified staff and resources, so there is renewed confidence that a long-time solution will be worked out.

The hard core of the problem lies in the fact that under existing law, properties of public utilities are assessed by the state board of equalization, though each pays taxes at the rates set by each county and city in which it operates. All other property is assessed by county or city assessors. The board of equalization has limited powers to keep local assessments in line as between counties. The big problem is to hold assessments of the two kinds of property on a level with each other, so that neither type pays more than its fair share of the tax bill.

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THE CURRENT situation arises in part from the last major overhaul given the assessment system in 1933, utilities were returned to local tax rolls, but their valuation continued with the state board. Another cause is a legal club over local assessments, given to the state board by a 1949 law which has been suspended several times by the Legislature so that it never went into operation. Under it, the state could adjust its aid to schools if counties do not meet assessment standards.

Despite the ineffectiveness of this law, the board of equalization twice acted under its Constitutional powers to force a number of counties to increase their ratios of assessed to market values, and several who did not comply lost some school money aid in 1955-56. One took its case to court, and won a ruling which in effect said that the board must "equalize" all properties in a county, and must equalize all counties after fair hearings. The courts' decision was not appealed by the board.

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THE INTERIM committee and its staff have already embarked on a broad program of meetings with groups concerned, and has scheduled a whole series of meetings in the future for local officials, Legislators, and interested groups so that all can present their views. Staff experts have made a thorough analysis of board of equalization assessment methods, and are reviewing data on value of about ninety per cent of state valuations. Another team is studying actual assessment practices in the counties, and is making a survey of actual property sales in certain counties.

The results of these meetings and the various studies should be available to the interim committee by December. Based upon their findings and the public hearings, the committee will decide on its recommendations for any needed changes in law, or in administrative practices, to the 1959 Legislature. One thing seems certain: the committee and its staff are doing every thing possible to see that we get full and correct facts upon which to formulate sound legislation.


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