

South Cook tax rates soar

Increases deepen area's economic woes

By GREG HINZ

After jacking up its tax rate a painful 22% in just four years, you might think that Thornton Township High School District 205 is flush with the cash to buy anything it wants.

Think again.

The 6,000-student district—which serves portions of Dolton, South Holland, Markham and other communities—recently cut more than 5% of its teachers and other staff, with dozens of other layoffs likely soon. Half the freshman football program is gone. The student book rental fee is about to go up \$50 to \$155. And the district last year had to borrow \$22 million to pay operational costs and restore depleted cash reserves.

Welcome to the fractured new math of Chicago's south suburbs.

Once the center of a vital industrial belt that made the Chicago area famous, the south suburbs are caught in a vicious downward cycle in which business flees, the tax base stagnates—at best—and local governments flirt with bankruptcy.

"There's nothing left to tax," says Scott Goldstein, vice-presi-

dent of the Metropolitan Planning Council, a Chicago-based policy organization.

Though local residents bear most of the pain, all taxpayers are affected, with the state pumping in more aid and, in one case, bailing out financially collapsed school District 152½ in Hazel Crest.

Local officials have been grumbling for years about rising signs of blight in the area stretching from the Indiana border west nearly to Oak Forest. But an unheralded new study shows just how bad things have become—and how fast.

The study by anti-tax reform group Citizens for Fair Assessments and Taxes computed average tax rates by township, and found that southeastern Cook County suffered a dramatically different fate during the mostly prosperous 1990s from the rest of the county.

Specifically, the group found that between 1990 and 2001, property values grew so much in Chicago and most of northern Cook County that the tax rate on property owners dropped, even as local governments actually

raised the tax levies.

For instance, in Lake View Township on the city's North Side, the tax rate went from 10.093% on each \$100 of a property's equalized assessed valuation to 7.740%, a 23.3% reduction. In the suburbs, the tax rate dropped 5% or more in such areas as Elk Grove, Niles, New Trier and Wheeling townships.

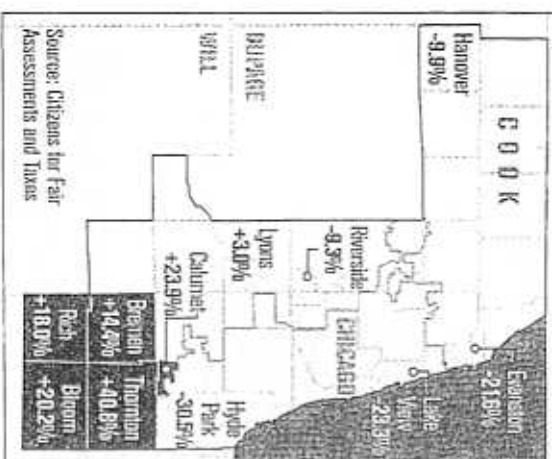
In west Cook County, rates generally rose or fell by moderate, single-digit amounts.

But the story was reversed in five townships in southeast Cook County: Thornton, Rich, Calumet, Bloom and Bremen. There, average tax rates soared in a decade of stunning prosperity, with increases ranging from 14.4% in Bremen Township to a stunning 40.8% in Thornton Township.

In 1990, tax rates in those townships still were roughly comparable to the rest of the county. But by 2001, property of the same equalized assessed valuation was hit with a 16.113% tax rate in Thornton Township and 13.425% in Bloom Township—far more than the 7.989%

A HEAVY BURDEN

Tax rates in southern Cook County townships surged between 1990 and 2001, while rates in other parts of the county remained nearly flat or decreased.



rate in Palatine Township in northwest Cook County, or even the 8.611% in Orland Township in southwest Cook.

"You'd be crazy to put a factory or shopping center in Thornton, unless you got a really good tax-incentive deal" and paid a cheap land price, says Theodore See SOUTH COOK on Page 58

Rates soar, fiscal woes deepen

SOUTH COOK from Page 4

Swain, a tax specialist at Chicago law firm Gould & Ratner. Even then, he adds, you'd have to worry that the value of land would drop more, threatening your investment.

For south suburban governments, such figures mean "very hard times," Mr. Swain adds. "The same services, which escalate in cost with inflation, have to be paid by fewer and fewer taxpayers at a higher price."

Other data sources suggest the same thing. One example: The five southeast Cook townships encompass only 13% of the properties in the entire county, but accounted for 28% of the parcels auctioned off for failure to pay back taxes in 2000, according to figures supplied by the offices of county Treasurer Maria Pappas and county Assessor James Houlihan.

Various interest groups are divided on what to do about the problem.

Citizens for Fair Assessments and Taxes wants to cut spending and taxes. Mr. Houlihan favors special incentives to spur growth in the tax base.

Bert Docter, the immediate past chairman of the Southland Chamber of Commerce, says that statewide taxes ought to be raised to provide local property tax relief. In the past five years alone, 450 homes have gone off the tax rolls in south suburban Harvey, he notes.

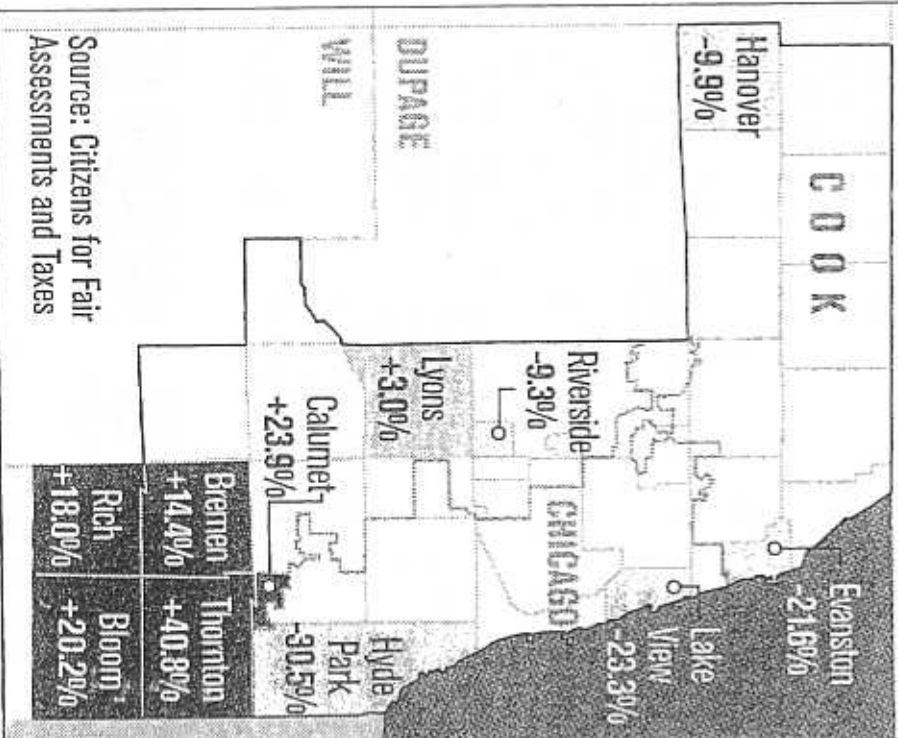
Kamala Buckner, superintendent of the Thornton High School District, says she's just trying to keep her operation afloat.

The easy cuts were made long ago, she says, and the district can't close any of its three schools because all now are filled nearly to capacity.

"There's nothing like a steel mill," she sighs wistfully, recalling the days when her district's tax base was fat, rather than increasing just 1% or 2% a year, as it has of late. "I need to be able to pay my bills."

A HEAVY BURDEN

Tax rates in southern Cook County townships surged between 1990 and 2001, while rates in other parts of the county remained nearly flat or decreased.



Highest to lowest Tax Rate

Tax Rate Summaries for 1990 and 2001 : Townships in Cook County

Township	1990 Avg.	2001 Avg.	Percent of Change
Thornton	11.447	16.113	40.76%
Cicero	10.85	13.85	25.70%
Calumet	10.980	13.604	23.86%
Bloom	11.161	13.425	20.20%
Oak Park	12.819	13.332	4%
Berwyn	10.129	12.563	24%
Rich	10.440	12.323	18.03%
River Forest	10.546	11.602	10.01%
Bremen	9.938	11.369	14.40%
Proviso	9.251	9.756	5.40%
Evanston	11.953	9.367	-21.63%
Lyons	8.950	9.222	3%
Stickney	8.361	9.178	9.77%
Worth	10.098	8.854	-12.32%
Palos	8.690	8.848	1.81%
Riverside	9.565	8.675	9.30%
Orland	9.195	8.611	-6.36%
Schaumburg	8.921	8.539	-4.28%
Hanover	9.395	8.467	-9.88%
Northfield	7.754	8.390	8.21%
Wheeling	8.863	8.366	-5.61%
Lemont	8.553	8.179	-4.37%
Lake	10.966	8.132	-8.13%
Palantine	8.302	7.989	-3.77%
Rogers Park	10.050	7.965	-20.75%
Maine	8.239	7.948	-3.54%
Jefferson	10.428	7.893	-24.31%
Lake View	10.093	7.740	-23.32%
West Chicago	9.964	7.730	-22.42%
South Chicago	10.544	7.719	-26.80%
North Chicago	9.964	7.692	-22.80%
Leyden	7.453	7.682	3.08%
Hyde Park	10.788	7.499	-30.49%
Elk Grove	7.811	7.303	-6.51%
Niles	7.866	7.226	-8.14%
Norwood Park	7.628	7.063	-7.34%
New Trier	8.649	6.952	-19.62%
Barrington	7.078	6.485	-8.35%

Source: Citizens for Fair Assessments & Taxes (CFAT) 312-573-0308

www.Fairtaxes.net

Number of tax codes averaged for 2001: 5,049

Highest to lowest Rate of Change

Tax Rate Summaries for 1990 and 2001 : Townships in Cook County

Township	1990 Avg.	2001 Avg.	Percent of Change
Thornton	11.447	16.113	40.76%
Cicero	10.85	13.85	25.70%
Berwyn	10.129	12.563	24%
Calumet	10.980	13.604	23.86%
Bloom	11.161	13.425	20.20%
Rich	10.440	12.323	18.03%
Bremen	9.938	11.369	14.40%
River Forest	10.546	11.602	10.01%
Stickney	8.361	9.178	9.77%
Riverside	9.565	8.675	9.30%
Northfield	7.754	8.390	8.21%
Proviso	9.251	9.756	5.40%
Oak Park	12.819	13.332	4%
Leyden	7.453	7.682	3.08%
Lyons	8.950	9.222	3%
Palos	8.690	8.848	1.81%
Maine	8.239	7.948	-3.54%
Palantine	8.302	7.989	-3.77%
Schaumburg	8.921	8.539	-4.28%
Lemont	8.553	8.179	-4.37%
Wheeling	8.863	8.366	-5.61%
Orland	9.195	8.611	-6.36%
Elk Grove	7.811	7.303	-6.51%
Norwood Park	7.628	7.063	-7.34%
Lake	10.966	8.132	-8.13%
Niles	7.866	7.226	-8.14%
Barrington	7.078	6.485	-8.35%
Hanover	9.395	8.467	-9.88%
Worth	10.098	8.854	-12.32%
New Trier	8.649	6.952	-19.62%
Rogers Park	10.050	7.965	-20.75%
Evanston	11.953	9.367	-21.63%
West Chicago	9.964	7.730	-22.42%
North Chicago	9.964	7.692	-22.80%
Lake View	10.093	7.740	-23.32%
Jefferson	10.428	7.893	-24.31%
South Chicago	10.544	7.719	-26.80%
Hyde Park	10.788	7.499	-30.49%

Source: Citizens for Fair Assessments & Taxes (CFAT) 312-573-0308

www.Fairtaxes.net

Number of tax codes averaged for 2001: 5,049