Frequently Asked Questions
Town of Longmeadow/ Assessors Office

What are property taxes?
Property taxes are known as an "ad valorem" tax which means they are based on the value of the property rather than the ability of the property owner to pay. Property taxes are collected to pay the towns' expenses. (The money that is raised from property taxes is called the Tax Levy, and in Longmeadow it accounts for about sixty-eight percent (68%) of the total raised.) The money collected from property taxes (about $36 million dollars in fiscal 2008), called the tax levy is apportioned to property owners based on assessed values.

When and how is property valued?
Assessment, by law must be at market value (aka full and fair cash value) as of January 1 of each year. Every three years the Department of Revenue (D.O.R.) certifies that assessments are at market value by reviewing the sales data within the town. (Between the triennial certification periods assessed values are reviewed and adjusted if necessary. This does not have to be certified by the D.O.R.) After assessments are approved by the state the "burden of proof" lies with the taxpayer to show that they are excessive. The overview by the D.O.R. is designed to insure that values are equitable and uniform. The level of assessment is measured by how closely they approximate market value. That is, are the assessments reasonably close to what the property can sell for in a "normal" transaction? Assessment uniformity refers to the way in which all properties are valued using similar criteria and similar methodology. Questions of overvaluation and/or disagreements with an assessment are handled through an abatement process.

Who are the Assessors?
As a result of the change in the town's structure (beginning in May of 2005) the first Board member was appointed instead of elected. The Board of Assessors consists of three appointed individuals who serve staggered three-year terms. One position is filled each year unless a vacancy occurs. The appointed Assessors are part time. A full time Assistant Assessor and staff carry out board decisions and are responsible for the day to day operations of the office.

When and where does the board meet?
Meetings are held periodically throughout the year, usually in the Community Room of the Police Station at 34 Williams Street. The meetings are open to the public and the first fifteen minutes are reserved for taxpayer comments and discussion. Notices of the meetings are posted across from the Clerk's Office on a community bulletin board (and outside the Assessors' Office) in the Town Hall at 20 Williams Street. Accepted minutes are posted on the town's web site www.longmeadow.org.

What are the Assessors' responsibilities?
Assessors are the chief tax officials in the community. They administer tax policies established at the State level by Legislators and at the local level by Mayors in cities and Boards of Selectmen in towns such as Longmeadow. Assessors are primarily responsible for **discovering, listing and valuing** real and personal property in the community. They keep track of changes in ownership and sale prices from deed transfers that are sent from the Hampden County Registry. Physical changes to improvements are inspected as permits are received from the building department. Interior and/or exterior inspections are conducted to determine if these changes have an impact

on the value of the property. The Assessors meet to vote on abatement and exemption applications, review changes in the tax laws and oversee the general conduct of the office.

Assessors' policies are based on state laws. The Department of Revenue's legal staff provides guidance to Assessors to properly interpret state statutes. These statutes pertain to required dates and deadlines for filing for abatements and exemptions, income and asset requirements for various exemptions, etc.

In addition to the Assessors valuing property they act as an intermediary to process motor vehicle excise. The value of all real and personal property, motor vehicles and trailers are used to arrive at taxable amounts (know as the commitment) that are forwarded to the Collector for billing and collection. Excise values are determined at the State level (Registry of Motor Vehicles www.mass.gov/rmv) and sent to the individual cities and towns. Motor Vehicle Excise tax is one of the few sources of revenue that remains at the local level (it does not have to be sent to the state for redistribution).

Why is the previous owner's name (seller/grantor) on the bill when I am the "new" owner?
This is an example of a statutory requirement that the Assessors must follow. Massachusetts General Laws state that the tax bill for real and personal property **must** include the name of the owner as of January 1 of the year proceeding the fiscal year (the fiscal year begins July 1). The owner of the property on January 1, 2007 for example, is the one who will be listed on the bill for fiscal 2008 that covers the period from July 1, 2007 to June 30, 2008. We understand that this can be confusing and an annoyance for new owners who are not receiving their bills directly. Because Longmeadow's bills go out four times each fiscal year it may appear that the Town has not acknowledged the change in ownership or cannot get the records correct. Although this may be a source of aggravation, the Assessors believe that **not** following this procedure could nullify the town's ability to collect monies should a property need to be acquire by the town for non payment of taxes.

For the past six or seven years the Assessors' Office has sent a "welcome" packet to new owners. The packet includes a frequently asked questions sheet, a property information card and a sales verification questionnaire that we request be returned to us. We also offer to do a physical inspection of the home and improvements to correct any discrepancies. Please call the Assessors with any comments, concerns and suggestions you may have that will help us improve any aspect of customer service.

How can I reduce my property tax bill? / What is an abatement? / Are there other ways to lower my taxes?

Abatements - The Assessors can lower an assessment if there is an error in the factual data, or if a taxpayer can show that a property assessment is not in line with assessments for an improved property of similar style, age, square footage, amenities, etc. A taxpayer can only seek an abatement from the time the third bill, know as the "actual" bill is mailed (usually one of the last days in December) until these bills are due to be paid on February 1. The application must be in writing on an approved form! (There are different guidelines if bills are mailed after December 31.) Corrections to factual data can be made at any time however, the change in assessment is applied to the next year's bill if it is not done through the abatement process (i.e. timely filed). The timing of when an assessment can be adjusted is prescribed by statute. This applies whether

the change will increase or decrease the assessed value. It also applies if the Town made an error on the property card. Again, whether the error is against or in favor of the owner, it can only be applied to the current or future tax year (if filed timely, or the next fiscal year). There are no retroactive abatements.

Senior Work Program – Several years ago (fiscal 2002) the Select Board adopted a new statute know as the "senior work program" that is administrated by the Council on Aging (565-4150). This allows a limited number of elderly individuals to reduce their tax bill by up to $675 per year in exchange for work done in various town offices. Information is available at the COA. This type of "abatement" is applied to the fourth quarter tax bill that is due May 1.

Exemptions –

1. **Exemptions to Persons** - Massachusetts General Laws contain several statutes that provide for individual exemptions from real property tax bills. Personal exemptions are specific to the individual and applied to the owners' real estate. Exemptions are available for veterans with a war-service connected disability; "legally" blind person; a surviving spouse or minor children of a police officer or firefighter killed in the line of duty; indigent individuals who due to age, infirmity and poverty are unable to pay taxes as well as elderly individuals who meet residency, age, income and asset requirements. Any questions related to personal exemptions should be addressed to the Assessor's Office. Legislation also allows for an income tax credit beginning with the filing of the 2001 income tax form for certain qualifying individuals 65 years of age or older. For information on income tax credits, please consult your tax preparer.

2. **Exemptions to Property** – Certain property is exempt from taxation. Charitable, religious, educational institutions as well as property owned by Federal, State and local government are included.

What is Market value?

Market value is the major focus of most real property appraisals. Usually included in the definition is the price that a typically motivated buyer will give a typically motivated seller, as of a specified date, allowing for a reasonable exposure time in the market. It should be noted that the sale price of a property is not necessarily its market value. (An extreme example would be the sale of property to a family member for $1.00.) Also, sales of several similar homes may be a better indicator of market value than the price paid for a specific, neighboring property. Distressed sales (due to personal circumstances) or excessively overpriced homes with extended marketing time may also be suspect as market sales.

What is Longmeadow's fiscal year?

This is the period from July 1 through June 30. Fiscal year 2008 began on July 1, 2007 and ends June 30, 2008. (Fiscal 2009 will begin on July 1, 2008.) The effective **date of value** for real and personal property is January 1 of the calendar year **prior** to the fiscal year. For fiscal 2008, January 1, 2007 is the date of value. Consequently, sales of property in calendar year 2006 are used to analyze sales. Real and personal property bills are issued on a fiscal year basis while motor vehicle excise bills are issued on the basis of the normal calendar year.

When are changes to the improvements applied to the property value as compared to changes in value due to market conditions?

Physical changes to property such as an addition to the house are applied up to June 30, 2007 for fiscal 2008 values.

Property values are scheduled for "certification" for fiscal 2009 assessments. The assessed value is **an estimate** of what the property could have sold for on the date of valuation (January 1) if it had been available for sale, and exposed to the market for a reasonable period of time. Each year the Assessors strive to have assessments uniform and fair based on the sales that took place from January to December of the year prior to January 1 valuation date. (Sales of property between January and December of 2006 were used to value property with a valuation date of January 1, 2007 for fiscal 2008.)

Challenges to these values are welcome through the abatement process. Properties with physical changes due to a building permit received the additional increase of the remodeling/addition based on what was done by June 30. Any physical change noted by the Assessors can be applied to a property at any time, whether or not a permit is involved, it then becomes an issue of what fiscal year it is applied.

What is real property?

Real property is the interests, benefits and rights inherent in the ownership of real estate.

What is real estate?

Real estate is an identified parcel or tract of land, including improvements, if any.

What is personal property?

This is portable, tangible objects such as furnishings, machinery and equipment; all property that is not classified as real estate. A motor vehicle excise bill is issued in lieu of a personal property tax bill. A personal property bill can also be issued for an unregistered vehicle.

How is the property tax rate calculated?

In Massachusetts the tax rate is expressed in dollars per thousand. An example using fiscal 2008 figures is as follows. Total tax levy to be raised from real and personal property ($35,956,386.75) divided by the total taxable real and personal property value ($2,120,069,974) produces a decimal equivalent tax rate that must be multiplied by 1,000 to convert it into the proper format. The tax rate and ultimately the amount of tax paid, is directly related to the amount of money (tax levy) that is approved to be raised and spent by voters at the annual Town meeting and any special Town meetings.

Mathematical Calculation Of The Tax Rate

Fiscal 2008 Tax Rate = Tax Levy ÷ Total Taxable Valuation x 1,000 (Calculated Below)
$16.96 = ($35,956,386.75 ÷ $2,120,069,974) x 1,000

What is Proposition 2½?

This is the title given to an initiative petition adopted by the voters of Massachusetts in 1980. It restricts the increase in the tax levy to two and a half percent of the prior year's tax levy, plus new growth, overrides and/or debt exclusions. **Proposition 2½: does not apply to individual tax bills.**

In addition, the total tax levy can never exceed 2½% of the total property value of all taxable property in the community (which means the tax rate can never exceed $25.00 per thousand dollars of assessed value.)

What is the taxable value of real and personal property in Longmeadow?

FISCAL 2008 DATA	
Personal Property	$27,506,493
Real Property (land and buildings)	$2,092,563,481
TOTAL TAXABLE VALUE	$2,120,069,974

What do I need to know about motor vehicle excise?

According to the Department of Revenue, the motor vehicle excise is imposed for the privilege of registering a motor vehicle. It is an assessment in lieu of a personal property tax, however it is billed on a calendar year, not a fiscal year like real and personal property. The amount of the motor vehicle excise due on any particular vehicle or trailer in any registration year is calculated by multiplying the "value" of the vehicle by the motor vehicle excise tax rate. That rate is fixed at $25.00 per thousand dollars of value. (The $25.00 rate is the same in all 352 towns and cities in Massachusetts. It does not change like the property tax rate.). The value of a vehicle for the purpose of determining excise is a percentage of the manufacturer's suggested retail price for that vehicle based on the year of manufacture. The applicable percentages are set out in MGL Ch. 60A § 1 as follows:

In the year preceding the year of manufacture 50% of manufacturer's suggested retail price,
In the year of manufacture 90%,
In the second year 60%,
In the third year 40%,
In the fourth year 25%,
In the fifth year and succeeding years 10%,

The manufacturer's list price for any particular vehicle is the price recommended by the manufacturer as the selling price of that vehicle new. It is the manufacturer's list price rather than the actual purchase price that is used as the value for purposes of calculating the motor vehicle excise. The following example illustrates how excise amounts are calculated.

Year of Purchase	**List Price times % times $25 per $1000 =**	**Excise Bill**
Preceding model year (2008 model in 2007)	$45,000 x 50% = $22,500 x .025 =	$562.50
Same year as model year (2008 model in 2008)	$45,000 x 90% = $40,500 x .025 =	$1,012.50
Second year (2007 model in 2008)	$45,000 x 60% = $27,000 x .025 =	$675.00
Third year (2006 model in 2008)	$45,000 x 40% = $18,000 x .025 =	$450.00
Fourth Year (2005 model in 2008)	$45,000 x 25% = $11,250 x .025 =	$281.25
Fifth Year (2004 model in 2008)	$45,000 x 10% = $4,500 x .025 =	$112.50

Questions or Comments

All taxpayers are welcome to call this office (413-565-4115) for assistance and clarification of any question or concerns that they have about their value or data on property cards. We will gladly provide information and assist you in any way that we can. Only your state senator or state representative can change laws and regulations pertaining to cities and towns in Commonwealth. Although sometimes cumbersome to apply, the laws and regulations are in place to provide fair and uniform application of assessments for everyone.