

MINNESOTA OPINION

FIRST FIVE

Keep calm, enjoy the rising tide of home values

By Rochester Post Bulletin Editorial Board

On April 6, 2021, "Saturday Night Live" did a racy mock commercial for Zillow, the website that lets users anonymously browse for information – including estimated market values – for nearly every home in the United States.

It was a timely skit. People were snooping into the values of friends' and neighbors' homes.

Minnesota residents received these notices in mid-March, and we suspect that a lot of people immediately had a bad case of sticker shock. Across the state, the estimated state market value of homes increased 20% or more.

Such increases can frighten homeowners, who immediately conclude that a 20% increase in their home's value will translate into a 20% increase in their property taxes.

Fortunately, those fears are likely overblown, and we'd offer this advice to homeowners: Calm down.

Single-family homes, apartment buildings, commercial property and agricultural land all have increased significantly in value in the past year.

That increase in value, however, doesn't create a tax bonanza for the county, because local government spending isn't based on how much tax revenue is generated. Quite the opposite, in fact. Later this fall, each county will estimate the amount of tax revenue it will need to meet its obligations in 2023, and property owners will then be taxed in proportion to the value of the property they own in order to raise the necessary revenue.

That means a lot of tax scenarios are possible. If the county's estimated expenses for next year go up 8%, and your home's estimated market value went up the typical 20%, then you likely will face something in the neighborhood of an 8% increase in your property tax bill.

On the other hand, if your home's value went up less than the typical home, you might see no increase at all, or even a decrease in your tax bill – especially if the county adds new real estate its property tax rolls.

Still confused? Perhaps this will help. If the current housing bubble bursts next year, and home values plummet 30% almost overnight (as they did in 2007), you wouldn't see a 30% percent cut in your property taxes. The county would still need to plow roads, staff county parks, pay sheriff's deputies and provide social services. That's why there are years when some property owners see their estimated market value drop, yet their tax bill actually increases. The county must pay its bills.

The reality is that we won't know the true meaning of the 2023 valuation notices until your county sets its budget for next year and sends out Proposed Taxes Notices in November.

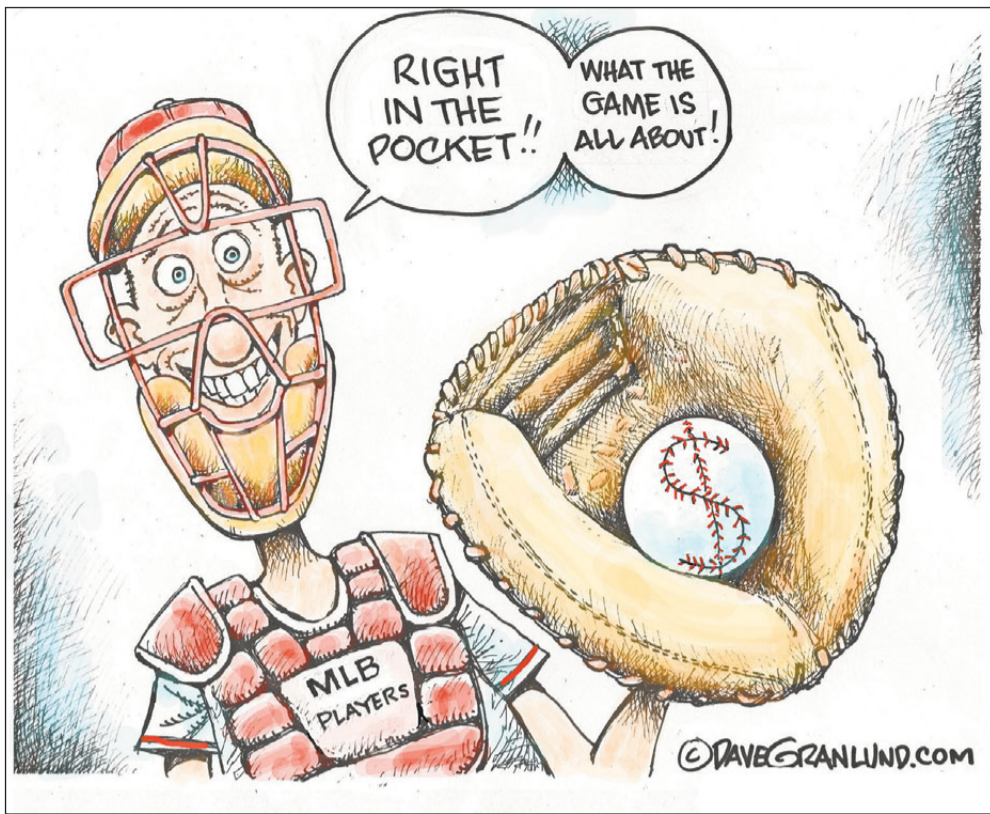
Still, if you believe a mistake has been made in the valuation of your property, now is the time to act immediately.

The first step is to contact your county assessor. If you still have concerns after making that initial contact, you will need to participate in a Local Board of Appeal and Equalization meeting. The process is described on the back of your valuation notice.

While no one likes a tax increase – especially at a time when inflation is soaring – we'd point out that Minnesota consistently ranks high on any quality-of-life rankings. We like our well-maintained park and roads to be plowed promptly. We want our first responders to be well-trained and well-equipped.

These things can't be accomplished on the cheap – yet we'd also point out that while Minnesota's property tax burden is the 18th highest in the nation, the typical homeowner in Minnesota enjoys a lower property tax rate than our neighbors in Iowa, Wisconsin and South Dakota.

This Minnesota Opinion editorial is the opinion of the editorial board of the Rochester Post Bulletin.



The Ojibwe new year

Land determines time. Giwedining, or up north, we have six seasons, including a couple shorter seasons: "freeze up" and "thaw." The Cree and Ojibwe people are the northern people here; to the west the



WINONA LADUKE

Dene, Gwichin and Inuit have different descriptions of the seasons.

What's for sure is that the freeze up, Gashkaadino Giizis or November in Anishinaabemowin, is called the Freezing Over Moon. March is referred to as Onaabaanigiizis, or the Hard Crusted Snow Moon.

In the Anishinaabe world, and the calendar of our people, there's nothing about Roman emperors like Julius or Augustus. Those are not months to most of us. In an Indigenous calendar time belongs to Mother Earth, not to humans.

If language frames your understanding of the world, those who live on the land, have a different understanding than those who live in the memories of Emperors. There's no empire in creator's time.

The Ojibwe near year has arrived. That's what I know. Gregorian calendars are based on commemorative times, while the Anishinaabe view the new year to begin as the world awakens after winter. Indigenous spiritual and religious practices are often said to be reaffirmation religions, reaffirming the relationship with Mother Earth.

The maple sugarbush, that's really when the year begins, when the trees awaken. We are told that long ago, the maples ran all year, and the trees produced a sweet syrup. Our own folly changed that equation, and today the maple sap runs only in the spring, and it takes 40 gallons of sap to make a gallon of syrup.

We learned to be respectful of the gifts provided by Mother Earth. That's a good lesson for all of us. We go to the sugarbush now, and we are grateful for the sugar which comes from a tree. This sugar is medicine.

As spring approaches, we prepare our seeds of hope, and we think about the future plants, foods and warmth ahead – aabawaa, it's getting warm out. Minookamin, the land, is warming up and with that, the geese and

swans return in numbers to our lakes, thankful to be home. After that 5,000-mile flight, it seems that we could make sure their homes are in good shape, their waters clean.

I've been worrying about that Roundup stuff and the unpronounceable chemicals big agriculture is about to levy on these lands. I've always maintained that if you put stuff on your land that ends in "-cide," whether herbicide, fungicide or pesticide, it's going to be a problem. After all, that's the same suffix as homicide, genocide and suicide.

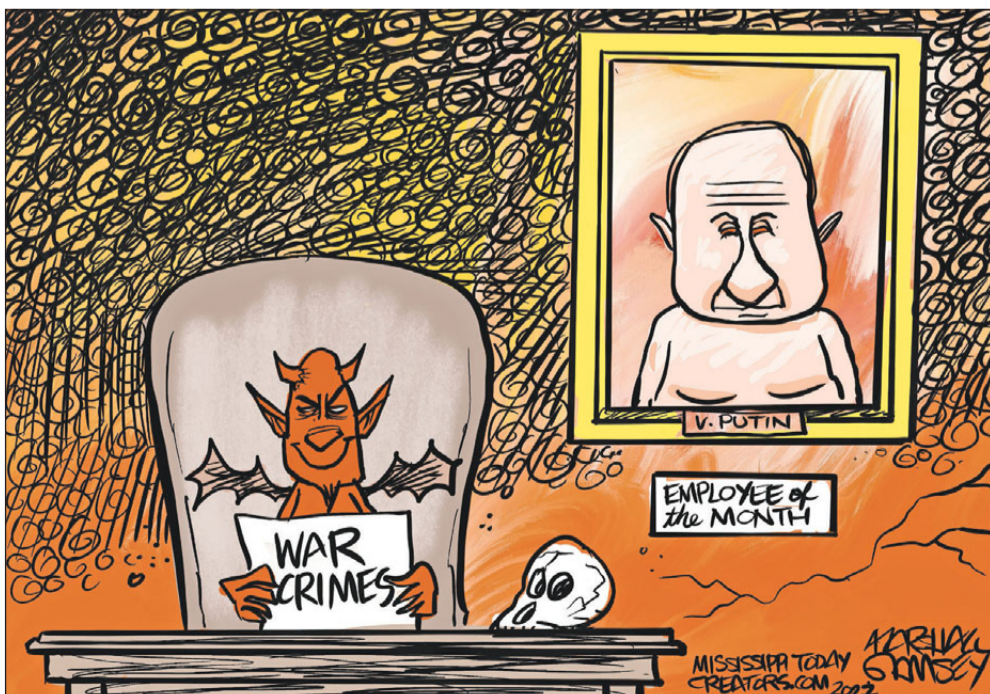
Don't eat stuff that ends with -cide. So, heading into a local Fleet Farm, or Ace Hardware, there's going to be a lot of that in the aisles. Take Monsanto's Roundup, that's the stuff we are going to see all over these stores; there are thousands of lawsuits about the non-Hodgkin lymphoma. Or maybe paraquat, associated with Parkinson's disease. An estimated 6.1 billion kilos of glyphosate-based weed killers were sprayed across gardens and fields worldwide between 2005 and 2014 (the most recent point at which data has been collected). That is more than any other herbicide, so understanding the true impact on human health is vital.

A 2016 study which found a 1,000% rise in the levels of glyphosate in our urine in the past two decades – suggesting that increasing amounts of glyphosate is passing through our diet.

From the microplastics in our blood to the weedkiller in our urine, I'd like a little less weird stuff in my body, and maybe we move toward organic – the geese and bees like that better. That's one of my prayers for this New Year. Along with my New Year's resolutions: to listen better, to not lose my mittens, be with my family, and to grow more food and hemp. It's time to make those plans. As climate change transforms our world, I am still hoping we can keep a few constants, like our six seasons.

This is what I know, the geese return, and that's a time. When the crows gather, the maple trees flow with sap and the world is being born again. I wish you all a Happy New Year.

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Free speech, press need freedom of information

By Kevin Goldberger
Freedom Forum

'The right to speak and the right to print, without the right to know, are pretty empty.'

These are the words of Harold Cross, author of "The People's Right to Know," a book largely regarded as the inspiration for the federal Freedom of Information Act, which Congress passed in 1967.

The FOIA – and its state-level counterparts – guarantees us the right to request records from any government agency, allowing the public to oversee the activities of government. It not only enhances our exercise of the rights to free speech and freedom of the press but also directly benefits society by potentially exposing government waste, abuse and corruption.

While many view the FOIA as a federal law for journalists to use in their role as watchdogs of government activity, access to records provides an ongoing benefit to all of us.

Reporters from The New York Times used FOIA to track the expenses and meetings of Scott Pruitt, the former head of the Environmental Protection Agency, who resigned in 2018 amid allegations of corruption. A blog associated with the Times also used FOIA to learn that the Department of Agriculture received 64 complaints from 2007 to 2009 about foreign objects found in hot dogs sold to the public.

At the local level, the Associated Press used FOIA in the wake of Hurricane Katrina to determine that 122 other levees built by the Army Corp of Engineers around the country contained deficiencies. That FOIA request brought the issue to the attention of the residents of those 122 communities.

But it's not just reporters who use FOIA. Ordinary people – even those who are skeptical of the role of the media in overseeing government – use the law to great effect. In 2019, students at Back of the Yards High School in Chicago used public records to learn that the two white police officers at their mostly minority school each had substantial misconduct complaints against them. The students then asked for the removal of police officers from their schools.

Other Gen Zers have used their digital skills to access and analyze public records, especially large datasets, through technology.

Jack Sweeney, a freshman at the University of Central Florida, has used publicly available flight information to track SpaceX founder Elon Musk's private jet – which he then reported via Twitter @ElonJet.

On a larger scale, FOIA requesters should applaud the recent creation of Gumshoe by graduate students at NYU's Center for Data Science. Gumshoe is an artificial intelligence tool that sorts through large swaths of information. This is more necessary than ever given the explosion of information that is created by the government every year and the hundreds, if not thousands, of pages of text that one might receive via a public records request.

You don't have to be a journalist or computer genius to use public records laws – and certainly not to benefit from their use. That's why we all should celebrate Sunshine Week and public records all year round.

Kevin Goldberger is a Freedom Forum First Amendment specialist. First Five is a monthly column on First Amendment issues produced by The Freedom Forum, a nonpartisan nonprofit founded by Al Neuharth. First Five is an effort to inform citizens on the freedoms protected by the First Amendment.