

**STATE OF INDIANA
Board of Tax Review**

ELDON & KAREN PLETCHER)	On Appeal from the Elkhart County
)	Property Tax Assessment Board
PetitionerS,)	of Appeals
)	
v.)	Petition for Review of Assessment, Form 131
)	Petition No. 20-019-99-1-5-00001
ELKHART COUNTY PROPERTY TAX)	Parcel No. 09-07-24-252-010 ¹
ASSESSMENT BOARD OF APPEALS)	
And JEFFERSON TOWNSHIP)	
ASSESSOR)	
)	
Respondents.)	

Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law

On January 1, 2002, pursuant to Public Law 198-2001, the Indiana Board of Tax Review (IBTR) assumed jurisdiction of all appeals then pending with the State Board of Tax Commissioners (SBTC), or the Appeals Division of the State Board of Tax Commissioners (Appeals Division). For convenience of reference, each entity (the IBTR, SBTC, and Appeals Division) is hereafter, without distinction, referred to as "State". The State having reviewed the facts and evidence, and having considered the issues, now finds and concludes the following:

Issue

Whether the grade factor applied to the residence is appropriate.

¹Petition shows parcel number 09-07-24-200-014. Property record card and public record report show 09-07-24-252-010.

Findings of Fact

1. If appropriate, any finding of fact made herein shall also be considered a conclusion of law. Also, if appropriate, any conclusion of law made herein shall also be considered a finding of fact.
2. Pursuant to Ind. Code § 6-1.1-15-3, Eldon and Karen Pletcher (the Petitioners), filed a Form 131 petition requesting a review by the State. The Elkhart County Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals (PTABOA) issued its determination on the underlying Form 130 petition on May 16, 1999. The Form 131 petition was filed on June 16, 1999.
3. Pursuant to Ind. Code § 6-1.1-15-4, a hearing was held on March 12, 2002 before Administrative Law Judge Debra Eads. Testimony and exhibits were submitted into evidence. Eldon Pletcher was self-represented. Cathy Searcy, recording secretary, represented the Elkhart County PTABOA. Veronica Williams represented Jefferson Township.
4. At the hearing, the Form 131 was made a part of the record and labeled Board Exhibit A. The Form 117 Notice of Hearing was labeled Board Exhibit B. In addition, the following exhibits were submitted into evidence:

Petitioner's Exhibit 1-Nineteen (19) interior and exterior photographs of the
subject property

Petitioner's Exhibit 2-Forty (40) exterior photographs of the property to the east of
the subject property

Petitioner's Exhibit 3-Two (2) exterior photographs of the property to the west of
the subject

Petitioner's Exhibit 4-Copies of "Public Records Full Report" containing
information for the subject property and the properties to the immediate

east and west

Petitioner's Exhibit 5-Sixty-four (64) additional photographs (submitted at the end of the hearing and primarily duplicates of Exhibits 1-3)

Respondent's Exhibit 1 – (1) Form 131 Petition; (2) Form 115 Notice of Final Determination; (3) Form 130 Petition; (4) property record card (PRC) for the subject

Respondent's Exhibit 2-(1) Four (4) exterior photographs of the subject property; (2) three (3) exterior photographs of the property immediately to the east of the subject; (3) two (2) exterior photographs of the property immediately to the west of the subject; (4) PRC for the subject prior to the changes made by the PTABOA; (5) PRC for the subject following the changes made by the PTABOA; (6) PRC for the property to the immediate east of the subject; (7) PRC for the property to the immediate west of the subject.

5. The subject property is located at 16425 County Road 20, Goshen, Jefferson Township, Elkhart County, Indiana.
6. The Administrative Law Judge did not conduct an on-site inspection of the property.

Issue - Grade Factor

7. Petitioner testified that the value of the properties adjoining the subject serves to de-value his property. The double-wide beside his house does not help his grade. The photographs submitted illustrate the problem. *Pletcher Testimony. Petitioner's Exhibits 1-5.*
8. The Administrative Law Judge advised the Petitioner that a grade factor is specific to that structure and is not affected by surrounding properties. In response to questions concerning the construction of the subject, the Petitioner

did not offer significant insight into the materials or workmanship of the subject.

9. The subject structure has a grade factor of “B-1”. The properties to the east and west are graded “C-2” and “C-1” respectively. The subject dwelling is superior to the adjoining properties and that fact is reflected in the assigned grades. The Petitioner has failed to meet the burden in proving the assigned grade factor is not appropriate. *Williams Testimony. Respondent’s Exhibit 2.*

Conclusions of Law

1. The Petitioner is limited to the issues raised on the Form 130 petition filed with the Property Tax Assessment Board of Appeals (PTABOA) or issues that are raised as a result of the PTABOA’s action on the Form 130 petition. 50 IAC 17-5-3. See also the Forms 130 and 131 petitions authorized under Ind. Code §§ 6-1.1-15-1, -2.1, and -4. In addition, Indiana courts have long recognized the principle of exhaustion of administrative remedies and have insisted that every designated administrative step of the review process be completed. *State v. Sproles*, 672 N.E. 2d 1353 (Ind. 1996); *County Board of Review of Assessments for Lake County v. Kranz* (1964), 224 Ind. 358, 66 N.E. 2d 896. Regarding the Form 130/131 process, the levels of review are clearly outlined by statute. First, the Form 130 petition is filed with the County and acted upon by the PTABOA. Ind. Code §§ 6-1.1-15-1 and -2.1. If the taxpayer, township assessor, or certain members of the PTABOA disagree with the PTABOA’s decision on the Form 130, then a Form 131 petition may be filed with the State. Ind. Code § 6-1.1-15-3. Form 131 petitioners who raise new issues at the State level of appeal circumvent review of the issues by the PTABOA and, thus, do not follow the prescribed statutory scheme required by the statutes and case law. Once an appeal is filed with the State, however, the State has the discretion to address issues not raised on the Form 131 petition. *Joyce Sportswear Co. v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 684 N.E. 2d 1189, 1191 (Ind. Tax 1997). In this appeal,

such discretion will not be exercised and the Petitioner is limited to the issues raised on the Form 131 petition filed with the State.

2. The State is the proper body to hear an appeal of the action of the County pursuant to Ind. Code § 6-1.1-15-3.

A. Indiana's Property Tax System

3. Indiana's real estate property tax system is a mass assessment system. Like all other mass assessment systems, issues of time and cost preclude the use of assessment-quality evidence in every case.
4. The true tax value assessed against the property is not exclusively or necessarily identical to fair market value. *State Board of Tax Commissioners v. Town of St. John*, 702 N.E. 2d 1034, 1038 (Ind. 1998)(*Town of St. John V*).
5. The Property Taxation Clause of the Indiana Constitution, Ind. Const. Art. X, § 1 (a), requires the State to create a uniform, equal, and just system of assessment. The Clause does not create a personal, substantive right of uniformity and equality and does not require absolute and precise exactitude as to the uniformity and equality of each *individual* assessment. *Town of St. John V*, 702 N.E. 2d at 1039 – 40.
6. Individual taxpayers must have a reasonable opportunity to challenge their assessments. But the Property Taxation Clause does not mandate the consideration of whatever evidence of property wealth any given taxpayer deems relevant. *Id.* Rather, the proper inquiry in all tax appeals is “whether the system prescribed by statute and regulations was properly applied to individual assessments.” *Id.* at 1040. Only evidence relevant to this inquiry is pertinent to the State's decision.

B. Burden

7. Ind. Code § 6-1.1-15-3 requires the State to review the actions of the PTABOA, but does not require the State to review the initial assessment or undertake reassessment of the property. The State has the ability to decide the administrative appeal based upon the evidence presented and to limit its review to the issues the taxpayer presents. *Whitley Products, Inc. v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 704 N.E. 2d 1113, 1118 (Ind. Tax 1998) (citing *North Park Cinemas, Inc. v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 689 N.E. 2d 765, 769 (Ind. Tax 1997)).
8. In reviewing the actions of the PTABOA, the State is entitled to presume that its actions are correct. See 50 IAC 17-6-3. “Indeed, if administrative agencies were not entitled to presume that the actions of other administrative agencies were in accordance with Indiana law, there would be a wasteful duplication of effort in the work assigned to agencies.” *Bell v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 651 N.E. 2d 816, 820 (Ind. Tax 1995). The taxpayer must overcome that presumption of correctness to prevail in the appeal.
9. It is a fundamental principle of administrative law that the burden of proof is on the person petitioning the agency for relief. 2 Charles H. Koch, Jr., *Administrative Law and Practice*, § 5.51; 73 C.J.S. Public Administrative Law and Procedure, § 128.
10. Taxpayers are expected to make factual presentations to the State regarding alleged errors in assessment. *Whitley*, 704 N.E. 2d at 1119. These presentations should both outline the alleged errors and support the allegations with evidence. “Allegations, unsupported by factual evidence, remain mere allegations.” *Id* (citing *Herb v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 656 N.E. 2d. 890, 893 (Ind. Tax 1995)). The State is not required to give weight to evidence

that is not probative of the errors the taxpayer alleges. *Whitley*, 704 N.E. 2d at 1119 (citing *Clark v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 694 N.E. 2d 1230, 1239, n. 13 (Ind. Tax 1998)).

11. One manner for the taxpayer to meet its burden in the State's administrative proceedings is to: (1) identify properties that are similarly situated to the contested property, and (2) establish disparate treatment between the contested property and other similarly situated properties. *Zakutansky v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 691 N.E. 2d 1365, 1370 (Ind. Tax 1998). In this way, the taxpayer properly frames the inquiry as to "whether the system prescribed by statute and regulations was properly applied to individual assessments." *Town of St. John V*, 702 N.E. 2d at 1040.
12. The taxpayer is required to meet his burden of proof at the State administrative level for two reasons. First, the State is an impartial adjudicator, and relieving the taxpayer of his burden of proof would place the State in the untenable position of making the taxpayer's case for him. Second, requiring the taxpayer to meet his burden in the administrative adjudication conserves resources.
13. To meet his burden, the taxpayer must present probative evidence in order to make a prima facie case. In order to establish a prima facie case, the taxpayer must introduce evidence "sufficient to establish a given fact and which if not contradicted will remain sufficient." *Clark*, 694 N.E. 2d at 1233; *GTE North, Inc. v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 634 N.E. 2d 882, 887 (Ind. Tax 1994).
14. In the event a taxpayer sustains his burden, the burden then shifts to the local taxing officials to rebut the taxpayer's evidence and justify its decision with substantial evidence. 2 Charles H. Koch, Jr. at §5.1; 73 C.J.S. at § 128. See *Whitley*, 704 N.E. 2d at 1119 (The substantial evidence requirement for a taxpayer challenging a State Board determination at the Tax Court level is not "triggered" if the taxpayer does not present any probative evidence concerning

the error raised. Accordingly, the Tax Court will not reverse the State's final determination merely because the taxpayer demonstrates flaws in it).

C. Review of Assessments After *Town of St. John V*

15. Because true tax value is not necessarily identical to market value, any tax appeal that seeks a reduction in assessed value solely because the assessed value assigned to the property does not equal the property's market value will fail.
16. Although the Courts have declared the cost tables and certain subjective elements of the State's regulations constitutionally infirm, the assessment and appeals process continue under the existing rules until a new property tax system is operative. *Town of St. John V*, 702 N.E. 2d at 1043; *Whitley*, 704 N.E. 2d at 1121.
17. *Town of St. John V* does not permit individuals to base individual claims about their individual properties on the equality and uniformity provisions of the Indiana Constitution. *Town of St. John*, 702 N.E. 2d at 1040.

D. Grade Factor

18. "Grade" means the classification of an improvement based on certain construction specifications and quality of materials and workmanship. 50 IAC 2.2-1-30.
19. Grade is used in the cost approach to account for variations from the norm or "C" grade. The quality and design of a building are the most significant variables in establishing grade. 5- IAC 2.2-10-3.
20. The determination of the proper grade requires assessors to make a variety of

subjective judgments regarding variations in the quality of materials and workmanship and the quality of style and design. *Mahan v. State Board of Tax Commissioners*, 622 N.E. 2d 1058, 1064 (Ind. Tax 1993). For assessing officials and taxpayers alike, however, the Manual provides indicators for establishing grade. The text of the Manual (see 50 IAC 2.2-10-3), models and graded photographs (50 IAC 2.2-11-4), assist assessors in the selection of the proper grade factor.

21. The major grade classifications are A through E. 50 IAC 2.2-10-3. The cost schedules (base prices) in the Manual reflect the C grade standards of quality and design. The following factors (or multipliers) are assigned to each major grade classification:

“A” grade	160%
“B” grade	140%
“C” grade	100%
“D” grade	80%
“E” grade	40%

Intermediate grade levels ranging from A+10 through E-4 are also provided for in the Manual to adequately account for quality and design factors between major grade classifications. 50 IAC 2.2-10-3(c).

22. The Petitioner based his case on photographs of the subject property and the properties to the immediate east and west. The photographs of the subject fail to document specifics concerning the construction specifications or materials and workmanship that form the basis for a determination of the grade factor.
23. The property tax information does not specifically relate to the grade factor of the subject.
24. Assuming arguendo that the subject dwelling has construction factors less than

those required to support the assigned grade factor, the responsibility of quantifying how those deficiencies affect the grade factor remains with the Petitioner. The Petitioner did not attempt to quantify an appropriate grade factor.

25. For the reasons indicated above the Petitioner failed to meet the burden regarding the grade factor issue. Accordingly, no change is made to the assessment.

The above stated findings and conclusions are issued in conjunction with, and serve as the basis for, the Final Determination in the above captioned matter, both issued by the Indiana Board of Tax Review this ____ day of _____, 2002.

Chairman, Indiana Board of Tax Review