



## Valuing More Than Property: Listening to our Community and Advocating for Property Tax Reform

By: Dr. Carri Brown, Fairfield County Auditor

As Fairfield County carries out the state-mandated 2025 property valuation update, we want residents to know this isn't just about numbers—it's about people.

Behind every valuation of a residence is a family. A home. A story. And that's why we've focused this process on something sometimes lost in government work: listening.

We've held several hundred one-on-one conversations this summer already—real, face-to-face dialogues—because we believe residents deserve the opportunity for meaningful exchanges of information. Property valuation can have real financial consequences, and those deserve thoughtful, human-centered engagement. With over 70,000 parcels in the county, we knew questions and concerns would come. So, we made it a priority to create as many personal touchpoints as possible. And through those conversations, we have learned a great deal.

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### A Human-Centered Approach to Property Valuation

We know that email or online forms can't always capture the full story with a mass appraisal. That's why we offered in-person meetings—to give every resident a chance to talk through their concerns, ask questions, and share information about their specific property. This process is more than a state-mandated update. It's a chance to have meaningful, respectful conversations. And for many homeowners, that dialogue has brought much-needed clarity and reassurance.

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### Seniors Speak Out: A Call for Fairness and Stability

Many older residents—especially those on fixed incomes—have shared a simple but powerful worry: **“We want to stay in our homes. But we're not sure we can afford to.”**

They're not asking to be exempt from contributing to their communities. They're asking for fairness—for policies that reflect today's economic reality, not outdated income thresholds from decades past. We agree it's time to revisit the Homestead Exemption. One common suggestion we have heard: raise the eligibility income cap to somewhere between **\$50,000 and \$65,000**. That isn't a call for special treatment—it's a call for dignity, security, and peace of mind.  
*(The income cap is about \$40,000 for the 2025 application period.)*

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### Understanding the Tax Puzzle: What Valuation Really Means

One of the most common concerns we hear is: “If my home value goes up, won't my taxes skyrocket?”



The short answer is: not necessarily. And the increase will not be a dollar for dollar increase as compared to a valuation increase.

An important part of the equations is “what has been voted” and there is a sense of voter-fatigue overall.

Thanks to House Bill 920, voted levies (which make up the largest portion of most tax bills) do not collect more money when property values increase due to the market. Instead, the rate is automatically reduced to keep collections flat.

If you have new property or have added to your home with new construction, that portion of the increased value will result in increases to a property tax bill, though, and many residents have new construction in Fairfield County.

Confusion also sometimes arises with the term “inside millage”—a smaller, but stable source of funding that does rise with property values. It supports vital services like public safety (the Sheriff’s Office and municipal police forces, for example), and it’s capped statewide at 10 mills per district.

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### Inside vs. Outside Millage: What’s the Difference and Why It Matters

**Inside millage is unvoted** and automatically collected. It grows with property values and is a crucial funding stream for police, fire, and emergency services. But because it grows without a vote, some residents feel it should be capped to reflect inflation or modest annual limits such as 3%.

Importantly, none of the residents we’ve spoken to suggest defunding public safety—on the contrary, they express deep appreciation for law enforcement and emergency services.

**Outside millage**, on the other hand, must be **approved by voters**. Again, when property values increase, **HB 920 ensures those voted levies don’t collect more** (except with new construction) unless a new levy is passed.

This distinction is key to understanding your property tax bill. Striking a balance is possible: we can support public safety and explore taxpayer protections—like limiting inside millage revenue growth.

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### Preserving Neighborhood Integrity: Owner-Occupants vs. Absentee Investors

We’ve also heard from many residents concerned about absentee landlords and investor-owned homes. The frustrations are real—rising rents, declining property maintenance, and a sense that profits are being prioritized over community well-being.

We support stronger local oversight, including requirements for local contacts on rental properties and good neighbor ordinances. Just as important, we believe owner-occupants should receive **priority** in



tax credits and relief programs. People who live in their homes invest more than money—they invest care, commitment, and connection.

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## What We've Heard: Themes Emerging from Community Conversations

Beyond taxes and valuations, residents have raised thoughtful concerns about broader topics in the community—like short-term rentals and solar farms. Some worry about how these developments could affect long-term property values and quality of life.

We appreciate these insights. And while the 2025 update reflects market conditions as of **January 1, 2025** (not future predictions), these conversations help influence long-term policy thinking. Your feedback is shaping more than this valuation cycle—it's helping guide future decisions as we continue sharing that feedback with local leaders and legislators.

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## Ideas for Policy Recommendations

Based on what we've heard and learned, we support the **County Auditors' Association of Ohio's** four primary recommendations to better support residents statewide:

1. **Modernize the Homestead Exemption** for low- to middle-income seniors.
2. **Prioritize owner-occupants** for tax credits over absentee investors.
3. **Cap school levy revenue growth to inflation**, ensuring predictability for taxpayers.
4. **Create flexible relief tools** like tax deferrals and targeted support programs for low- to middle-income groups.

And one more consideration, especially considering recent increases in Central Ohio home prices:

**Limit the growth of inside millage to inflation or 3% (whichever is lower)**—so any growth beyond that would require voter approval. This would preserve funding for essential services while protecting taxpayers.

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## Looking Ahead: Encouraged by Reform Conversations at the State Level

We are especially encouraged by the work of **Governor DeWine's property tax reform working group**, which is actively evaluating meaningful, resident-centered recommendations, including many of the ideas highlighted here. The working group is learning more and building upon the work of others to evaluate property tax reform.

We are hopeful that the working group's **final report** will lead to **thoughtful action by the Ohio Legislature**. Our communities deserve solutions that balance stability, fairness, and essential services.



## OFFICE OF COUNTY AUDITOR

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Property taxes are complex, but our commitment is simple: to listen and to engage. Because at the end of the day, this isn't just about appraisals—it's about homes. It's about people.

If you have questions, concerns, or simply want to better understand your property's valuation, we encourage you to reach out directly to the **County Auditor's Office**.

We're here to help—**one conversation at a time**.

If you have any questions, please contact the Auditor's Real Estate Offices at (740) 652-7030.

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