

Posted on Wed, Jul. 26, 2006

Upward bound

Mansfield sees big increase; Arlington has modest gain

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ARLINGTON -- The 2006 certified tax roll released Tuesday shows that Mansfield's boom continues even as Arlington posts modest -- but noticeable -- growth.

Arlington's net taxable values were up 3.7 percent, bringing the value to \$16.9 billion. Overall, Tarrant County saw 9.2 percent growth in net taxable values from the September 2005 tax roll. Mansfield posted 11.9 percent growth in net taxable value as commercial development appeared to more than make up for a leveling off in residential construction this year.

Arlington Mayor Robert Cluck said the report means that city leaders won't need to raise the city's property tax rate, which is 64.8 cents per \$100 of assessed value.

"We don't need a tax increase -- 3 1/2 to 4 percent was what I was looking for," Cluck said.

Property owners, however, may still see larger tax bills if their individual property values increase.

Tuesday's report is key because it gives cities, school districts and other taxing entities their first firm projections on which to write their budgets for the coming year.

Top gainers in Tarrant County included Westworth Village with a 49.5 percent gain in its tax base, Lakeside with a 26.6 percent gain and the Eagle Mountain-Saginaw school district, which saw a 24.1 percent gain.

"All those cities on that side . . . had good residential growth," said John Marshall, chief appraiser for the Tarrant Appraisal District.

Among the cities with the slowest growth were Bedford, Grapevine, Richland Hills and Watauga.

The Arlington school district's tax base grew slightly more than the city's, up 4.1 percent from last year. The number was slightly better than district officials had projected, Associate Superintendent Steve Brown said.

Superintendent Mac Bernd said he is proposing that the district drop the tax rate of \$1.75 per \$100 of assessed value to \$1.61. Part of that reduction is forced by school finance reform passed by legislators this spring.

Arlington City Councilman Steve McCollum said the city probably will never see double-digit growth again.

"There is an absolute relationship between the growth of our city, which is physically limited by the boundaries because we're almost built out," he said. "Other cities continue to expand through annexation."

Arlington also saw about \$280 million in new construction, most of which was residential, City Manager Jim Holgersson said.

For example, for the fiscal year 2006, which ends Sept. 30, Arlington has issued 4,167 building permits for residential compared to 1,663 for commercial.

Fort Worth saw an increase in taxable value of 14.3 percent.

The value of natural gas and other minerals nearly doubled to \$315 million countywide, providing an infusion of value in some areas. In Fort Worth, for instance, the mineral values still make up less than 1 percent of the taxable value. But in smaller cities such as Haslet, they can be a significant addition to the tax base, Marshall said.

In Mansfield, the city's tax base soared to \$3.5 billion, with new construction accounting for \$252 million of the \$400 million increase in taxable value. The gains provided a little breathing room for city budget makers, who presented their preliminary 2006-07 budget of \$30.87 million to the City Council on Monday night.

"We were looking at 9.8 or 10 percent growth," City Manager Clayton Chandler said. "That's great news."

He estimated the higher-than-projected value increase would generate roughly an extra \$100,000 in property tax revenues for the city.

The tax-base increase comes as a flourish of housing development appears to be tailing off. Mansfield issued more than 1,000 home construction permits in each of the past five years, but officials project about 725 permits by the end of the current fiscal year, Sept. 30.

Richard Wright, Mansfield's development services director, said he didn't expect the permit activity to keep up indefinitely. But he welcomes what he sees as a trend toward larger, more expensive homes, which he said is making up for the reduction in permits.

The Mansfield school district also saw continued growth with a 13.3 percent increase in net taxable value. The gain was no surprise to Lou Spiegel, associate superintendent of business and government affairs.

But Spiegel said it's too early to tell whether the gain will be enough to make up for the mandatory tax rate reduction.

Mansfield school district officials are recommending that the overall tax rate be dropped from \$1.77 per \$100 of assessed value this year to \$1.68. Spiegel has asked trustees to include all of a discretionary 4 cents on the rate for the 2006-07 school year, which would mean the district could not increase the rate again until 2008 without voter approval.

In Kennedale, net taxable values grew 7.7 percent, to \$392 million. About \$15 million of that increase was from new construction, mostly from home building in a subdivision north of Kennedale Parkway and near Little Road, said Interim City Manager Mark White.

Kennedale school district officials welcomed a 5 percent increase, which boosted the district's total taxable value to \$850 million. Board President Mike Walker said any extra revenue will help.

The town of Pantego's net taxable value grew 4.7 percent to \$234.4 million. Most of the \$1.6 million in new construction was contributed by home building along Mistletoe Court, said Town Secretary Tracy Norr.

Future value increases are expected from a new 29-lot development getting under way on Smith Barry Road on one of the town's last available large tracts.

The city of Dalworthington Gardens' taxable values grew 5.7 percent, to \$274.2 million, including \$5 million in new construction.

Staff writers Mike Lee and Heather Ann White contributed to this report.

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