

## **Bills for old taxes embitter residents**

**By Jessica DeLeón**

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Darell Winstead moved into the Lost Creek Ranch subdivision because he wanted to live in an unincorporated area where he wouldn't have to pay municipal taxes.

Now it turns out he may owe \$278 for Fort Worth city taxes he never expected to pay.

Winstead's neighborhood was annexed into Fort Worth in 2000, but the city property taxes were not assessed until 2003 because the Tarrant Appraisal District was never notified of the annexation.

And that has some residents in this 129-home neighborhood near Alliance Airport fuming. The back-tax bills on their new brick homes may run into hundreds of dollars. And they'll face future tax obligations.

"Everyone's really on edge about living here," said Winstead, a regional manager for American Express who moved to the neighborhood in 2002.

Fort Worth City Council members are scheduled to discuss the situation in a closed session Tuesday. City officials have said they will accept installments for the taxes until 2005.

Gary Mendizabal, who moved from Irving to Bandera Ranch Road a year ago, owes \$868 in unpaid Fort Worth taxes, according to the Tarrant County tax office Web site. His wife, Ivone, said when they received a letter in January explaining the situation, "We were like, 'Yeah, right.' "

The couple said they don't know where they're going to get the money.

John Marshall, chief appraiser for the Tarrant Appraisal District, said the agency learned of the error in December, when it received a plat of neighboring territory that indicated that Lost Creek Ranch is in Fort Worth.

Betsy Price, Tarrant County tax assessor/collector, said she learned of the annexation in late January.

In a March 4 memo to the council, City Manager Gary Jackson said he didn't know why the appraisal district wasn't informed of the annexations until December. Deputy City Attorney Marcella Olson said the city filed the annexation ordinance with the county clerk's office in December 2000. The city also sent a notice to about 15 other agencies, according to Jackson's memo.

In the future, the city plans to send such notices through certified mail, said Dot Kent, the city's interim public information officer.

City officials said they would give residents until Feb. 1, 2005, to make the payments with no penalties or interest. The tax office will offer installment plans.

"That will alleviate some of the hardship," said Anthony Snipes, assistant to the city manager. "We definitely sympathize with the residents."

Marshall said the appraisal district is trying to work with the residents. He said if homeowners had a homestead exemption in the school or county for 2002, then it will apply for that year.

The appraisal district has not seen a similar mix-up for several years, Marshall said. But it has occurred twice this year -- with Lost Creek Ranch and with 11 homes in the Reagan West Estates subdivision in Hurst.

In Hurst, a strip of land between Hurst and Colleyville had not been properly documented. Eventually, officials ruled that the property is in Hurst.

Olson said she hasn't found other problems related to recent Fort Worth annexations.

"There's no reason to believe at this point that it's an issue beyond Lost Creek," she said.

In Lost Creek Ranch, several residents said they believed they were in unincorporated Tarrant County, although homeowners paid Fort Worth Water Department bills for water, sewer and trash service.

Winstead said residents didn't make the connection. He said they also may have been confused because they have a Roanoke mailing address. Because of an ongoing border dispute between Denton and Tarrant counties, the residents, who live near the disputed region, also were not sure in which county they live.

"We didn't understand what was going on," Winstead said.

Gary Mendizabal said residents have seldom seen Fort Worth police patrolling the area.

Lt. Abbul Pridgen, a Fort Worth police spokesman, said officers have been dispatched to the area, though he did not know how often officers have patrolled the neighborhood.

"Places where there's higher crimes, that's where the resources are allocated," Pridgen said.

For newer residents -- such as Pam Bilton and Becky Jackson -- the back-tax bills are not so high. Both have lived in Lost Creek Ranch for only a few months, and their city property tax bills are about \$127 each for 2003.

"We got the good end of the deal," Jackson said.

Still, Bilton added, "It would have been nice to know."

Staff Writer Anna M. Tinsley contributed to this report.

### **Property tax dispute**

More than 100 homes in the Lost Creek Ranch subdivision near Alliance Airport were annexed into Fort Worth in 2000. But some city documents did not reach tax officials, and residents recently learned they may owe taxes for bills they did not receive.

- To find out if you owe city taxes, go to [www.tarrantcounty.com](http://www.tarrantcounty.com), click on "Property tax," then "Account search." Or, call the Tarrant County tax assessor/collector's office at (817) 884-1100.
- Tax officials have said they will set up payment plans for affected residents. The city is giving Lost Creek Ranch residents until Feb. 1, 2005, to make the payments with no penalties or interest.