

**BEFORE THE NEBRASKA TAX EQUALIZATION
AND REVIEW COMMISSION**

NORMAN H. AGENA, LANCASTER)
COUNTY ASSESSOR,)
)
Appellant,)
)
v.)
)
LANCASTER COUNTY BOARD OF)
EQUALIZATION)
)
and)
)
DARREL R. & SARAH HOPKINS,)
)
Appellees.)

Case No 07SV-126

DECISION AND ORDER
REVERSING THE DECISION OF THE
LANCASTER COUNTY BOARD OF
EQUALIZATION

The above-captioned case was called for a hearing on the merits of an appeal by Norman H. Agena, Lancaster County Assessor, ("the County Assessor") to the Tax Equalization and Review Commission ("the Commission"). The hearing was held in the Commission's Hearing Room on the sixth floor of the Nebraska State Office Building in the City of Lincoln, Lancaster County, Nebraska, on September 21, 2009, pursuant to an Order for Hearing and Notice of Hearing issued July 7, 2009. Commissioners Warnes and Hotz were present. Commissioner Warnes was the presiding hearing officer. Commissioner Wickersham was excused from participation by the presiding hearing officer. Commissioner Salmon was absent. The appeal was heard by a quorum of a panel of the Commission.

The presence of Norman H. Agena at the hearing was waived. Michael E. Thew, a Deputy County Attorney for Lancaster County, appeared as legal counsel for the County Assessor.

No one appeared on behalf of the Lancaster County Board of Equalization.

Darrel R. & Sarah Hopkins ("Taxpayers") were present at the hearing. No one appeared as legal counsel for the Taxpayers.

The Commission took statutory notice, received exhibits, and heard testimony.

The Commission is required by Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5018 (Cum. Supp. 2006) to state its final decision and order concerning an appeal, with findings of fact and conclusions of law, on the record or in writing. The final decision and order of the Commission in this case is as follows.

I. ISSUES

Was the County Board's decision, reversing a determination by the County Assessor that the land described in this appeal was disqualified for special valuation, unreasonable or arbitrary?

II. FINDINGS OF FACT

The Commission finds and determines that:

1. The parcel of real property to which this appeal pertains is described as S 33, T9, R6, 6TH PRINCIPAL MERIDIAN, LOT 26 NW, Lancaster, Nebraska, ("the subject property").
2. Prior to March 19, 2007, the County Assessor made a determination that the subject property should be disqualified for use of special valuation.
3. The Taxpayers protested that determination.
4. The County Board reversed the determination of the County Assessor.

5. The County Assessor timely filed an appeal of the County Board's decision with the Commission.
6. The County Board and the Taxpayers were served with Notices in Lieu of Summons and answered those Notices.
7. An Order for Hearing and Notice of Hearing issued on July 7, 2009, as amended by an Order issued on August 17, 2009, set a hearing of the appeal for September 21, 2009, at 1:00p.m. CDST.
8. An Affidavit of Service, which appears in the records of the Commission, establishes that a copy of the Order for Hearing and Notice of Hearing was served on all parties.

III. APPLICABLE LAW

1. The Commission may determine any question raised in the proceedings upon which an order, decision, determination or action appealed from is based. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5016(7) (Cum. Supp. 2008).
2. Subject matter jurisdiction of the Commission in this appeal is over issues raised during the county board of equalization proceedings. *Arcadian Fertilizer, L.P. v. Sarpy County Bd. of Equalization*, 7 Neb.App. 655, 584 N.W.2d 353 (1998).
3. The County Assessor has standing to appeal decisions of the County Board. *Phelps County Board of Equalization v. Graf*, 258 Neb. 810, 606 N.W.2d 736 (2000).
4. The Legislature may provide that agricultural land and horticultural land, as defined by the Legislature, shall constitute a separate and distinct class of property for purposes of

taxation and may provide for a different method of taxing agricultural land and horticultural land which results in values that are not uniform and proportionate with all other real property and franchises but which results in values that are uniform and proportionate upon all property within the class of agricultural land and horticultural land. Neb. Const. art. VIII, §1 (4).

5. For purposes of sections 77-1359 to 77-1363:

(1) Agricultural land and horticultural land means a parcel of land which is primarily used for agricultural or horticultural purposes, including wasteland lying in or adjacent to and in common ownership or management with other agricultural land and horticultural land.

Agricultural land and horticultural land does not include any land directly associated with any building or enclosed structure;

(2) Agricultural or horticultural purposes means used for the commercial production of any plant or animal product in a raw or unprocessed state that is derived from the science and art of agriculture, aquaculture, or horticulture. Agricultural or horticultural purposes includes the following uses of land:

(a) Land retained or protected for future agricultural or horticultural purposes under a conservation easement as provided in the Conservation and Preservation Easements Act except when the parcel or a portion thereof is being used for purposes other than agricultural or horticultural purposes; and

(b) Land enrolled in a federal or state program in which payments are received for removing such land from agricultural or horticultural production;

(3) Farm home site means not more than one acre of land contiguous to a farm site which

includes an inhabitable residence and improvements used for residential purposes, and such improvements include utility connections, water and sewer systems, and improved access to a public road; and

(4) Farm site means the portion of land contiguous to land actively devoted to agriculture which includes improvements that are agricultural or horticultural in nature, including any uninhabitable or unimproved farm home site. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1359 (Cum. Supp. 2006).

6. The Legislature may enact laws to provide that the value of land actively devoted to agricultural or horticultural use shall for property tax purposes be that value which such land has for agricultural or horticultural use without regard to any value which such land might have for other purposes or uses. Neb. Const. art. VIII, §1 (5).
7. Agricultural or horticultural land which has an actual value as defined in section 77-112 reflecting purposes or uses other than agricultural or horticultural purposes or uses shall be assessed as provided in subsection (3) of section 77-201 if the land meets the qualifications of this subsection and an application for such special valuation is filed and approved pursuant to section 77-1345. In order for the land to qualify for special valuation all of the following criteria shall be met: (a) The land is located outside the corporate boundaries of any sanitary and improvement district, city, or village except as provided in subsection (2) of this section; and (b) the land is agricultural or horticultural land. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1344 (1) (Supp. 2007).
8. The eligibility of land for the special valuation provisions is to be determined each year as of January 1, but if the land so qualified becomes disqualified on or before December 31

of that year, it shall be valued at its recapture value. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1344 (3) (Supp. 2007).

9. Parcel means a contiguous tract of land determined by its boundaries, under the same ownership, and in the same tax district and section. Parcel also means an improvement on leased land. If all or several lots in the same block are owned by the same person and are contained in the same tax district, they may be included in one parcel. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-132 (Supp. 2007).
10. At any time, the county assessor may determine that land no longer qualifies for special valuation pursuant to sections 77-1344 and 77-1347. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1347.01 (Supp. 2007).
11. If land is deemed disqualified, the county assessor shall send a written notice of the determination to the applicant or owner within fifteen days after his or her determination, including the reason for the disqualification. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1347.01 (Supp. 2007).
12. A protest of the county assessor's determination may be filed with the county board of equalization within thirty days after the mailing of the notice. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1347.01 (Supp. 2007).
13. A presumption exists that the County Board has faithfully performed its duties and has acted on competent evidence. *Omaha Country Club v. Douglas County Bd. of Equalization*, 11 Neb.App. 171, 645 N.W.2d 821 (2002).
14. The presumption in favor of the county board may be classified as a principle of procedure involving the burden of proof, namely, a taxpayer has the burden to prove that action by a board of equalization fixing or determining valuation of real estate for tax

purposes is unauthorized by or contrary to constitutional or statutory provisions governing taxation. *Gordman Properties Company v. Board of Equalization of Hall County*, 225 Neb. 169, 403 N.W.2d 366 (1987).

15. The presumption disappears if there is competent evidence to the contrary. *Id.*
16. Competent evidence means evidence which tends to establish the fact in issue. *In re Application of Jantzen*, 245 Neb. 81, 511 N.W.2d 504 (1994).
17. The Taxpayer has a burden to adduce evidence that the decision, action, order, or determination appealed from was unreasonable or arbitrary as prescribed by statute. *City of York v. York County Bd. of Equalization*, 266 Neb. 297, 664 N.W.2d 445 (2003).
18. The Commission may not grant relief unless it is shown that the action of the County Board was unreasonable or arbitrary. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5016 (8) (Cum. Supp. 2006).
19. Proof that the action of the County Board was unreasonable or arbitrary must be made by clear and convincing evidence. See, e.g., *Omaha Country Club v. Douglas Cty. Bd. of Equal.*, 11 Neb.App. 171, 645 N.W.2d 821 (2002).
20. "Clear and convincing evidence means and is that amount of evidence which produces in the trier of fact a firm belief or conviction about the existence of a fact to be proved." *Castellano v. Bitkower*, 216 Neb. 806, 812, 346 N.W.2d 249, 253 (1984).
21. A decision is "arbitrary" when it is made in disregard of the facts and circumstances and without some basis which could lead a reasonable person to the same conclusion. *Phelps Cty. Bd. of Equal. v. Graf*, 258 Neb 810, 606 N.W.2d 736 (2000).

22. A decision is unreasonable only if the evidence presented leaves no room for differences of opinion among reasonable minds. *Pittman v. Sarpy Cty. Bd. of Equal.*, 258 Neb 390, 603 N.W.2d 447(1999).

IV. ANALYSIS

The subject property is a 6.51 acre parcel which has a house, a barn, and a shed. The Taxpayer testified that he purchased the subject property in October 1998 for \$138,000. The Taxpayer further testified that his agricultural and/or horticultural pursuits on the subject property which have resulted in the commercial production of a plant or animal product in a raw or unprocessed state on the subject property has been the raising of goats for the purpose of selling their meat. His testimony was that a second pursuit has been to raise hay which he has used for the grazing of the goats. The Taxpayer submitted a completed questionnaire to the County Assessor listing 2 acres for “crops” and 3.75 acres for grazing. (E6:1). The Taxpayer provided evidence of gross sales of livestock for the years 2006 - \$402, and 2008 - \$560. (E2:9 & 11, E13:1).

The Taxpayer testified that he worked full time away from the subject property and the raising of goats amounted to approximately 5% of his total yearly income. His testimony was that the subject property is fenced for livestock.

Only agricultural land and horticultural land as defined by the legislature is eligible for special valuation. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1344 (1) (Supp. 2007). The statutory definition of agricultural land and horticultural land contains various terms which are critical to an

understanding of the statute. The term “parcel” has been defined by Nebraska’s Legislature.

"Parcel means a contiguous tract of land determined by its boundaries, under the same ownership, and in the same tax district and section. Parcel also means an improvement on leased land. If all or several lots in the same block are owned by the same person and are contained in the same tax district, they may be included in one parcel." Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-132 (Cum. Supp. 2006).

Other significant terms within the statutory definition of agricultural land and horticultural land have not been defined by the Legislature. The term “commercial production” has not been defined but only land used for the “commercial production” of any plant or animal product in a raw or unprocessed state that is derived from the science and art of agriculture, aquaculture, or horticulture, with exceptions noted above, may be agricultural land and horticultural land. The Commission has not found in statute or in Nebraska case law a definition of the term “commercial production.” Commercial can mean “of, in or relating to commerce.” *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2002, 456. An alternative definition is “from the point of view of profit: having profit as the primary aim.” *Id.* Prior to adoption of amendments to the statute defining agricultural land and horticultural land in 2006 the definition of agricultural and horticultural land contained a requirement that the land be used for the “production” of agricultural products. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1359 (Reissue 2003). The new term “commercial production” did not appear in the definition. *Id.* A statute should be construed to give effect to purposeful change in its provisions. A construction of “commercial production” to mean production from the point of view of making a profit gives effect to the

change in terminology as adopted by the legislature. The Commission finds that “commercial production” means production with the intent to make a profit .

It is appropriate to consider a number of factors to determine whether or not an activity is undertaken with a view to making a profit. See Wood, 548 T.M., Hobby Losses. Among the factors to be considered are: whether the activity is conducted in a business like manner with adequate records and adaption of operating methods to changing circumstances; expertise of the Taxpayer, if any, necessary for conduct of the operation; consultation with experts, if necessary, and reliance on appraisals or other data for decision making as necessary; time and effort expended by the Taxpayer in furtherance of the operation; any expectation of appreciation in the assets employed in the operation; success the Taxpayer has had in carrying on similar or dissimilar operations; the Taxpayer’s history of profits or losses with respect to the operation discounting startup losses and losses or gains due to unusual circumstances; any profits earned and the possibility of profits if none have been earned to date; the Taxpayer’s financial status i.e. the ability to sustain losses or incur costs without regard to returns; and elements of personal pleasure or recreation, or other motives other than profit or gain. The same factors are relevant to a determination of whether commercial production of a plant or animal product in a raw or unprocessed state that is derived from the science and art of agriculture, aquaculture, or horticulture (“commercial production”) has occurred on the parcel. In addition, the Commission will consider other factors as presented for consideration on a case by case basis.

Based on the Taxpayer's testimony and the evidence before the Commission, the Commission concludes that the requirement for commercial production on the parcel has been met. But that is not the only requirement.

Section 77-1359 of Nebraska statutes requires a determination that the primary use of a parcel be for commercial production before it can be deemed agricultural land and horticultural land. All uses of a parcel are to be considered when determining its primary use. *Agena v. Lancaster County Board of Equalization*, 276 Neb. 851, 758 N.W.2d 363 (2008). Primarily can be defined as first of all or in the first place. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2002, 1800. Primary can be defined as the "first in rank or importance." *Id.*

The subject property consists of 6.51 total acres, one acre is the homesite and a portion of the subject property has a farmsite on which exist the barn and a shed. The acres devoted to differing uses on the parcel are 5.75 acres (2 acres for the raising of the goats and 3.75 acres for the raising of grass/hay for the grazing of the goats) for commercial production. The balance of the acreage is for residential use. The primary use of a parcel is not, however, commercial production merely because the number of acres in the parcel used for commercial production exceeds the number of acres used for any other purpose. *Agena, supra*. Simply counting acres does not give effect to the change in statute enacted by the legislature requiring that the primary use of the entire parcel be considered.

The Property Tax Administrator, in Directive 07-01, advised that criteria other than area could be applied. (E3:3). The Property Tax Administrator, in Directive 07-01, indicated that other criteria uniformly applied could be used. An appraiser, employed by the County Assessor,

testified that the value of the residence was considered as a factor in all primary use determinations for special valuation qualification.

“Value can have many meanings in real estate appraisal; the applicable definition depends on the context and usage. In the market place, value is commonly perceived as the anticipated benefits to be received in the future.” *The Appraisal of Real Estate*, Twelfth Edition, Appraisal Institute, 2001, 20. “The economic concept of value is not inherent in the commodity, good, or service to which it is ascribed; it is created in the minds of the individuals who make up the market.” *Id.* at 29. Typically four independent factors create value; utility, scarcity, desire, and effective purchasing power. *Id.* “Utility is the ability of a product to satisfy a human want, need or desire.” *Id.* “Scarcity is the present or anticipated supply of an item relative to the demand for it.” *Id.* at 30. “Desire is a purchaser’s wish for an item to satisfy human needs (e.g., shelter, clothing, food, companionship) or individual wants beyond the essential required to support life.” *Id.* “Effective purchasing power is the ability of an individual or group to participate in a market ---- that is, to acquire goods with cash or its equivalent.” *Id.*

The value of a parcel of real estate is the sum of its component parts. See *The Appraisal of Real Estate*, Twelfth Edition, Appraisal Institute, 2001. “The value of owner-occupied residential property is based primarily on the expected future advantages, amenities, and pleasures of ownership and occupancy.” *The Appraisal of Real Estate*, Twelfth Edition, Appraisal Institute, 2001, 35. “The value of income-producing real estate is based on the income it will generate in the future.” *Id.* In the context of this appeal if greater utility is assigned to a use it will have a greater value. Greater value is then an indicator of the primary use of the parcel. Actual values of components of the subject property as determined by the County

Assessor as of January 1, 2007, were not disputed. Actual value of the subject property as determined by the County Assessor was \$196,065. (E9:1). The contribution to actual value of the residence, and its site as determined by the County Assessor was \$96,105. (E9:1). The appraiser employed by the County Assessor also testified that had the residence been rented, the rental rate of the residence would have been greater than the agricultural income from the income-producing portion of the parcel. The contribution to actual value of the 5.51 unimproved income-producing acres as valued by the County Assessor as rural residential was \$99,960. (E9:1) The contribution to value of the 5.51 unimproved income-producing acres was approximately \$500 per year based upon the sale of animals (E2:8-11). When weighing the relative uses of the parcel, the Commission gives greater weight to the income-producing contribution of the 5.51 acres than its residential land use assessment. The Commission has weighed these relative uses as well as all of the other relevant factors in making its determination.

The Commission finds that the appellant/County Assessor has rebutted by competent evidence the presumption that the County Board of Equalization had faithfully performed its duties and had competent evidence for its decision denying the County Assessor's disqualification of the land described in this appeal for special valuation. The Commission further finds that the County Assessor has provided by clear and convincing evidence that the decision of the county Board was arbitrary or unreasonable in its decision to grant greenbelt status to the subject property. The appeal of the County Assessor is granted and greenbelt status of the subject property is denied.

**V.
CONCLUSIONS OF LAW**

1. The Commission has subject matter jurisdiction in this appeal.
2. The Commission has jurisdiction over the parties to this appeal.
3. The County Assessor has adduced sufficient, clear and convincing evidence that the decision of the County Board is unreasonable or arbitrary and the decision of the County Board should be vacated and reversed.

**VI.
ORDER**

IT IS ORDERED THAT:

1. The decision of the County Board determining that the subject property was eligible for special valuation is vacated and reversed.
2. The subject property was not eligible for special valuation as of the assessment date, January 1, 2007.
3. This decision, if no appeal is timely filed, shall be certified to the Lancaster County Treasurer, and the Lancaster County Assessor, pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5018 (Cum. Supp. 2008).
4. Any request for relief, by any party, which is not specifically provided for by this order is denied.
5. Each party is to bear its own costs in this proceeding.
6. This decision shall only be applicable to tax year 2007.

7. This order is effective for purposes of appeal on November 17, 2009.

Signed and Sealed. November 17, 2009.

Robert W. Hotz, Commissioner

William C. Warnes, Commissioner

SEAL

APPEALS FROM DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSION MUST SATISFY THE REQUIREMENTS OF NEB. REV. STAT. §77-5019 (CUM. SUPP. 2008), OTHER PROVISIONS OF NEBRASKA STATUTES, AND COURT RULES.