

I Won My Property Tax Appeal but Lost The Senior Freeze. Now What?

Q. In 2014, I applied for the Senior Freeze and received a payment for my property taxes. In 2016, I had my home reassessed through an attorney because there was a big increase. The court ordered that the Township reduce my property taxes by \$980. I was happy, but that was short-lived because the next year, I was denied the Senior Freeze because my current taxes were lower than my base year. I explained in a letter to the state, to no avail. What can I do? Can I get a new base date?

--71 years young and losing my fixed income

A. You're in a tough spot. The New Jersey Senior Freeze program reimburses increases in property tax payments made by eligible residents age 65 and older. The amount received is calculated by comparing current year's taxes to the base year, which is often the date the home was purchased, said **Claudia Mott**, a certified financial planner with **Epona Financial Solutions** in Basking Ridge.

There are several criteria to be eligible, Mott said, including that you must be receiving Social Security benefits, you must be a continuous resident in the New Jersey for at least the last 10 years either as a renter or homeowner and you must have lived in your current home for at least the last three years. Then, you're only eligible if your property tax payments have been made in full and if you meet the income requirements. For 2017, your total income must be less than \$87,268, and for 2016, it must be below \$87,007, Mott said. Each year residents must complete and submit the Property Tax Reimbursement form in order to apply for a payment, Mott said.

There are other stipulations that may affect some potential applications, so be sure to review the details at the New Jersey Division of Taxation's Senior Freeze website.

"According to a representative at the New Jersey Division of Taxation's Senior Freeze Hotline, you may be eligible to receive a payment for 2017," Mott said. "It seems that a new base year would be created for you using the re-calculated 2016 tax rate and any future comparisons would be made to the new lower figure." She said the purpose of the payment is to reimburse for increases in property tax rates -- or a positive difference between the base and the current tax year. So if your taxes in 2017 were higher than the 2016 figure, you'd get a check. "Since your reassessed property taxes in 2016 were lower than your base year, the comparison would be a negative number and therefore no payment would be due," she said.

If you did not receive a form PTR-2 -they were mailed in February - you should contact the Hotline at (800) 882-6597 to confirm which application you should complete with your 2016 and 2017 tax data. They may send you a form PTR-2 or you may be instructed to complete form PTR-1, which is for those who are filing for the first time or had a claim denied. The deadline for filing the application is October 31, 2018.

Mott suggests you also look into the Homestead Benefit, which is a rebate that is usually applied to your property tax bill. "The two programs are not mutually exclusive and you can qualify and receive both," she said. "This program also has income limits and is currently based of 2015 income figures and the property taxes paid in 2006 on your principal residence."