

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

DON L. CLARKE,	)	
	)	
Appellant,	)	Case Nos. 10A 071, 10A 072, 10A 073, 10A
	)	074 & 10A 075
v.	)	
	)	DECISION AND ORDER
DODGE COUNTY BOARD OF	)	AFFIRMING THE DECISIONS OF
EQUALIZATION,	)	THE DODGE COUNTY BOARD OF
	)	EQUALIZATION
Appellee.	)	

The above-captioned cases were called for a hearing on the merits of appeals by Don L. Clarke ("the Taxpayer") 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 May 27, 2011, pursuant to an Order for Hearing and Notice of Hearing issued March 17, 2011. Commissioner Wickersham, Chairperson of the Commission, was the presiding hearing officer. Commissioner Wickersham designated Commissioners Wickersham, Warnes, and Salmon as a panel of the Commission to hear the appeals. Commissioner Salmon was excused. Commissioner Warnes was present. The appeals were heard by a quorum of the panel of the Commission.

Don L. Clarke was present at the hearing. No one appeared as legal counsel for the Taxpayer.

Stacey Hultquist, a Deputy County Attorney for Dodge County, Nebraska, was present as legal counsel for the Dodge County Board of Equalization ("the County Board").

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

The Commission is required to state its final decision and order concerning an appeal, with findings of fact and conclusions of law, on the record or in writing. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-

5018 (Reissue 2009). The final decision and order of the Commission in the consolidated cases is as follows.

## **I. ISSUES**

The Taxpayer has asserted that taxable value of the subject property as of January 1, 2010, is less than taxable value as determined by the County Board. The issues on appeal related to that assertion are:

Whether the decision of the County Board, determining taxable value of the subject property, is unreasonable or arbitrary; and

The taxable value of the subject property on January 1, 2010.

## **II. FINDINGS OF FACT**

The Commission finds and determines that:

1. The Taxpayer has a sufficient interest in the outcome of the above captioned appeals to maintain them.
2. The parcels of real property to which the above captioned appeals pertain are ("the Subject Property") described in the tables below.
3. Taxable value of each parcel of the subject property placed on the assessment roll as of January 1, 2010, ("the assessment date") by the Dodge County Assessor, value as proposed in timely protests, and taxable value as determined by the County Board is shown in the following tables:

Case No. 10A 071

Description: Tax Lots 7 & 13 Section 32, Township 20, Range 7, Dodge County, Nebraska.

	Assessor Notice Value	Taxpayer Protest Value	Board Determined Value
Land	\$73,350.00	\$9,780.00	\$73,350.00
Total	\$73,350.00	\$9,780.00	\$73,350.00

Case No. 10A 072

Description: Tax Lot 36 Section 32, Township 20, Range 7, Dodge County, Nebraska.

	Assessor Notice Value	Taxpayer Protest Value	Board Determined Value
Land	\$13,980.00	\$1,864.00	\$13,980.00
Outbuilding	\$1,185.00	\$In Land	\$1,185.00
Total	\$15,165.00	\$1,864.00	\$15,165.00

Case No. 10A 073

Description: Tax Lots 37 & 39 Section 32, Township 20, Range 7, Dodge County, Nebraska.

	Assessor Notice Value	Taxpayer Protest Value	Board Determined Value
Land	\$9,735.00	\$1,298.00	\$9,735.00
Total	\$9,735.00	\$1,298.00	\$9,735.00

Case No. 10A 074

Description: SW1/4SW1/4, & Tax Lots 11 & 15 Section 32, Township 20, Range 7, Dodge County, Nebraska.

	Assessor Notice Value	Taxpayer Protest Value	Board Determined Value
Land	\$90,675.00	\$12,090.00	\$90,675.00
Total	\$90,675.00	\$12,090.00	\$90,675.00

Case No. 10A 075

Description: Tax Lots 27 & 30 Section 32, Township 20, Range 7, Dodge County, Nebraska.

	Assessor Notice Value	Taxpayer Protest Value	Board Determined Value
Land	\$28,575.00	\$3,810.00	\$28,575.00
Total	\$28,575.00	\$3,810.00	\$28,575.00

4. Appeals of the County Board's decisions were filed with the Commission.
5. The appeals were consolidated for hearing by order of the Commission.
6. An Order for Hearing and Notice of Hearing issued on March 17, 2011, set a hearing of the appeals for May 27, 2011, at 9:00 a.m. CDT.
7. 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.
8. Taxable value of each parcel for the tax year 2010 is:

Case No. 10A 071

Land	\$73,350.00
Total	<u>\$73,350.00</u>

Case No. 10A 072

Land	\$13,980.00
Outbuildings	\$1,185.00
Total	<u>\$15,165.00</u>

Case No. 10A 073

Land	\$9,735.00
Total	<u>\$9,735.00</u>

Case No. 10A 074

Land	\$90,675.00
Total	<u>\$90,675.00</u>

Case No. 10A 075

Land	\$28,575.00
Total	<u>\$28,575.00.</u>

**III.  
APPLICABLE LAW**

1. Subject matter jurisdiction of the Commission in each of the above captioned appeals is over all questions necessary to determine taxable value. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5016(7) (Reissue 2009).
2. "Actual value is the most probable price expressed in terms of money that a property will bring if exposed for sale in the open market, or in an arm's length transaction, between a willing buyer and a willing seller, both of whom are knowledgeable concerning all the uses to which the real property is adapted and for which the real property is capable of being used. In analyzing the uses and restrictions applicable to real property the analysis shall include a full description of the physical characteristics of the real property and an identification of the property rights valued." Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-112 (Reissue 2009).
3. "Actual value may be determined using professionally accepted mass appraisal methods, including, but not limited to, the (1) sales comparison approach using the guidelines in section 77-1371, (2) income approach, and (3) cost approach." Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-112 (Reissue 2009).

4. "Actual value, market value, and fair market value mean exactly the same thing."  
*Omaha Country Club v. Douglas County Board of Equalization, et al.*, 11 Neb.App. 171, 180, 645 N.W.2d 821, 829 (2002).
5. Taxable value is the percentage of actual value subject to taxation as directed by section 77-201 of Nebraska Statutes and has the same meaning as assessed value. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-131 (Reissue 2009).
6. All taxable real property, with the exception of agricultural land and horticultural land, shall be valued at actual value for purposes of taxation. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-201(1) (Reissue 2009).
7. Agricultural land and horticultural land shall be valued for purposes of taxation at seventy five percent of its actual value. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-201 (2) (Reissue 2009).
8. "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." Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1359 (1) (Reissue 2009).
9. "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 shall be defined as agricultural land or horticultural land." Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1359 (2)

(Reissue 2009).

10. A presumption exists that the County Board has faithfully performed its duties and has acted on competent evidence. *City of York v. York County Bd. Of Equalization*, 266 Neb. 297, 64 N.W.2d 445 (2003).
11. 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).
12. The presumption disappears if there is competent evidence to the contrary. *Id.*
13. The order, decision, determination, or action appealed from shall be affirmed unless evidence is adduced establishing that the order, decision, determination, or action was unreasonable or arbitrary. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5016 (8) (Reissue 2009).
14. Proof that the order, decision, determination, or action appealed from 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).

15. "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).
16. 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).
17. 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).
18. "An owner who is familiar with his property and knows its worth is permitted to testify as to its value." *U. S. Ecology v. Boyd County Bd. Of Equalization*, 256 Neb. 7, 16, 588 N.W.2d 575, 581 (1999).
19. The County Board need not put on any evidence to support its valuation of the property at issue unless the taxpayer establishes the Board's valuation was unreasonable or arbitrary. *Bottorf v. Clay County Bd. of Equalization*, 7 Neb.App. 162, 580 N.W.2d 561 (1998).
20. A Taxpayer, who only produced evidence that was aimed at discrediting valuation methods utilized by the county assessor, failed to meet burden of proving that value of property was not fairly and proportionately equalized or that valuation placed upon property for tax purposes was unreasonable or arbitrary. *Beynon v. Board of Equalization of Lancaster County*, 213 Neb. 488, 329 N.W.2d 857 (1983).
21. A Taxpayer must introduce competent evidence of actual value of the subject property in order to successfully claim that the subject property is overvalued. Cf. *Josten-Wilbert*

*Vault Co. v. Board of Equalization for Buffalo County*, 179 Neb. 415, 138 N.W.2d 641 (1965) (determination of actual value).

#### **IV. ANALYSIS**

The subject property consists of four parcels of unimproved land and one parcel with improvements.

In August 2009, the Taxpayer entered into an agreement to grant a conservation easement to the Federal Government. (E11:195-199). The Taxpayer argues that because the conservation easement “removes” the subject property from agricultural production, the subject property must be classified and assessed as agricultural land and horticultural land as defined in section 77-1359(2)(b) of Nebraska Statutes. There is no evidence that agricultural or horticultural production occurred on any part of the subject property prior to the agreement. The subject property was not removed from agricultural or horticultural production and therefore does not come within the definition of agricultural land and horticultural land set out in section 77-1359(2)(b) of Nebraska Statutes.

The Taxpayer asserted all of the lands in the subject property are agricultural or horticultural waste land. Agricultural land and horticultural land may be classified as waste land. Agricultural and horticultural waste land is defined as:

“land that cannot be used economically and [is] not suitable for agricultural purposes. Such land types include but are not limited to, blowouts, riverwash (recent unstabilized alluvial deposits), marches, badlands, large deep gullies (including streambeds and banks), bluffs, rockland, gravel areas, and salt flats. To

qualify for wasteland the land must be lying in or adjacent to and in common ownership or management with land used for agricultural or horticultural purposes. Some of these areas could be developed or reclaimed for beneficial use by land shaping, revegetation, drainage, or possible other special practices. Until they are reclaimed, developed or restored to agricultural production or recreational uses they shall be classified as wasteland." 350 Neb. Admin. Code, ch. 14 §002.54 (03/09).

There is no evidence that any part of the subject property is used for agricultural or horticultural purposes or lies adjacent to, or in common ownership with, land used for agricultural or horticultural purposes. The subject property cannot be classified as agricultural or horticultural wasteland.

In various Exhibits the Taxpayer asserted that portions of the subject property were under water. Portions of the subject property that the County Board believed were underwater were assessed at \$0 in Dodge County for tax year 2010. (E6:3, E8:3, E9:3 and E10:3). The Taxpayer's argument seems to be that more of the subject property was underwater. How much more of the subject property may be under water is not in evidence and the Commission will not speculate.

## **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 Taxpayer has not produced competent evidence that the County Board failed to faithfully perform its official duties and to act on sufficient competent evidence to justify its actions.
4. The Taxpayer has not adduced sufficient, clear and convincing evidence that the decisions of the County Board are unreasonable or arbitrary and the decisions of the County Board should be affirmed.

**VI.  
ORDER**

**IT IS ORDERED THAT:**

1. The decisions of the County Board determining taxable values of the parcels comprising subject property as of the assessment date, January 1, 2010, are affirmed.
2. Taxable value, for the tax year 2010, of each parcel described in an appeal as referenced by the Case No. is:

Case No. 10A 071

Land	\$73,350.00
Total	<u>\$73,350.00</u>

Case No. 10A 072

Land	\$13,980.00
Outbuildings	\$1,185.00
Total	<u>\$15,165.00</u>

Case No. 10A 073

Land	\$9,735.00
Total	<u>\$9,735.00</u>

Case No. 10A 074

Land	\$90,675.00
Total	<u>\$90,675.00</u>

Case No. 10A 075

Land	\$28,575.00
Total	<u>\$28,575.00.</u>

3. This decision, if no appeal is timely filed, shall be certified to the Dodge County Treasurer, and the Dodge County Assessor, pursuant to Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5018 (Reissue 2009).
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 2010.
7. This order is effective for purposes of appeal on June 15, 2011.

Signed and Sealed. June 15, 2011.

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William C. Warnes, Commissioner

**SEAL**

**APPEALS FROM DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSION MUST SATISFY THE REQUIREMENTS OF NEB. REV. STAT. §77-5019 (REISSUE 2009), OTHER PROVISIONS OF NEBRASKA STATUTES, AND COURT RULES.**

I concur in the result.

The analysis above considers two standards of review for review. One standard of review is stated as a presumption found in case law the other is found as stated in statute. I do not believe consideration of two standards of review are required by statute or case law.

The Commission is an administrative agency of state government. *See Creighton St. Joseph Regional Hospital v. Nebraska Tax Equalization and Review Commission*, 260 Neb. 905, 620 N.W.2d 90 (2000). As an administrative agency of state government, the Commission has only the powers and authority granted to it by statute. *Id.* The Commission is authorized by statute to review appeals from decisions of a county board of equalization, the Tax Commissioner, and the Department of Motor Vehicles. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5007 (Reissue 2009). In general, the Commission may only grant relief on appeal if it is shown that the order, decision, determination, or action appealed from was unreasonable or arbitrary. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5016(8) (Reissue 2009).

The Commission is authorized to review decision of a County Board of Equalization determining taxable values. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-5007 (Reissue 2009). Review of County Board of Equalization decisions is not new in Nebraska law. As early as 1903, Nebraska Statutes provided for review of County Board assessment decisions by the district courts. Laws 1903, c. 73 §124. The statute providing for review did not state a standard for that review. *Id.* A standard of review stated as a presumption was adopted by Nebraska's Supreme Court. *See, State v. Savage*, 65 Neb. 714, 91 N.W. 716 (1902) (citing *Dixon Co. v. Halstead*, 23 Neb. 697, 37

N.W. 621 (1888) and *State v. County Board of Dodge Co.* 20 Neb. 595, 31 N.W. 117 (1887)). The presumption was that the County Board had faithfully performed its official duties and had acted upon sufficient competent evidence to justify its actions. *See id.* In 1959, the legislature provided a statutory standard for review by the district courts of county board of equalization, assessment decisions. 1959 Neb Laws, LB 55, §3. The statutory standard of review required the District Court to affirm the decision of the county board of equalization unless the decision was arbitrary or unreasonable or the value as established was too low. *Id.* The statutory standard of review was codified in section 77-1511 of the Nebraska Statutes. Neb. Rev. Stat. §77-1511 (Cum. Supp. 1959). After adoption of the statutory standard of review, Nebraska Courts have held that the provisions of section 77-5011 of the Nebraska Statutes created a presumption that the County Board has faithfully performed its official duties and has acted upon sufficient competent evidence to justify its actions. *See, e.g. Ideal Basic Indus. V. Nucholls Cty. Bd. Of Equal.*, 231 Neb. 297, 437 N.W.2d 501 (1989). The presumption stated by the Court was the presumption that had been found before the statute was enacted.

Many appeals of decisions made pursuant to section 77-1511 were decided without reference to the statutory standard of review applicable to the district courts review of a county board of equalization's decision. *See, e.g. Grainger Brothers Company v. County Board of Equalization of the County of Lancaster*, 180 Neb. 571, 144 N.W.2d 161 (1966). In *Hastings Building Co., v. Board of Equalization of Adams County*, 190 Neb. 63, 206 N.W.2d 338 (1973), the Nebraska Supreme Court acknowledged that two standards of review existed for reviews by the district court; one statutory requiring a finding that the decision reviewed was unreasonable or arbitrary, and another judicial requiring a finding that a presumption that the county board of

equalization faithfully performed its official duties and acted upon sufficient competent evidence was overcome. No attempt was made by the *Hastings* Court to reconcile the two standards of review that were applicable to the District Courts.

The Tax Equalization and Review Commission was created in 1995. 1995 Neb. Laws, LB 490 §153. Section 77-1511 of the Nebraska Statutes was made applicable to review of county board of equalization assessment decisions by the Commission. *Id.* In 2001, section 77-1511 of Nebraska Statutes was repealed. 2001 Neb. Laws, LB 465, §12. After repeal of section 77-1511, the standard for review to be applied by the Commission in most appeals was stated in section 77-5016 of the Nebraska Statutes. Section 77-5016(8) requires a finding that the decision being reviewed was unreasonable or arbitrary. *Brenner v. Banner County Board of Equalization*, 276 Neb. 275, 753 N.W.2d 802 (2008). The Supreme Court has stated that the presumption which arose from section 77-1511 is applicable to the decisions of the Commission. *Garvey Elevators, Inc. V. Adams County Bd. of Equalization*, 261 Neb. 130, 621 N.W.2d 518 (2001).

The possible results from application of the presumption as a standard of review and the statutory standard of review are: (1) the presumption is not overcome and the statutory standard is not overcome; (2) the presumption is overcome and the statutory standard is not overcome; (3) the presumption is not overcome and the statutory standard is overcome; (4) and finally the presumption is overcome and the statutory standard is overcome. The first possibility does not allow a grant of relief, neither standard of review has been met. The second possibility does not therefore allow a grant of relief even though the presumption is overcome because the statutory standard remains. *See City of York v. York County Bd of Equal.*, 266 Neb. 297, 664 N.W.2d 445 (2003). The third possibility requires analysis. The presumption and the statutory standard of

review are different legal standards, and the statutory standard remains after the presumption has been overcome. *See id.* The burden of proof to overcome the presumption is competent evidence. *Id.* Clear and convincing evidence is required to show that a county board of equalization's decision was unreasonable or arbitrary. *See, e.g. Omaha Country Club v. Douglas Cty. Bd. of Equal.*, 11 Neb.App. 171, 645 N.W.2d 821 (2002). Competent evidence that the county board of equalization failed to perform its duties or act upon sufficient competent evidence is not always evidence that the county board of equalization acted unreasonably or arbitrarily because the statutory standard of review remains even if the presumption is overcome. *City of York v. York County Bd of Equal.*, 266 Neb. 297, 664 N.W.2d 445 (2003). Clear and convincing evidence that a county board of equalization's determination, action, order, or decision was unreasonable or arbitrary, as those terms have been defined, may, however, overcome the presumption that the county board of equalization faithfully discharged its duties and acted on sufficient competent evidence. In any event, the statutory standard has been met and relief may be granted. Both standards of review are met in the fourth possibility and relief may be granted.

Use of the presumption as a standard of review has been criticized. *See* G. Michael Fenner, *About Presumptions in Civil Cases*, 17 Creighton L. Rev. 307 (1984). In the view of that author, the presumption should be returned to its roots as a burden of proof. *Id.* Nebraska's Supreme Court acknowledged the difficulty of using two standards of review and classified the presumption in favor of the county board of equalization 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. *See Gordman Properties Company v. Board of Equalization of Hall County*, 225 Neb. 169, 403 N.W.2d 366 (1987). Use of the *Gordman* analysis allows consideration of both the presumption and the statutory standard of review without the difficulties inherent in the application of two standards of review. It is within that framework that I have analyzed the evidence.

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Wm. R. Wickersham, Commissioner