

County sells woman's farm over \$572 tax bill

County sells farm to recoup \$572 in taxes

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BY DIANA STRICKER
For The Patriot-News

An 89-year-old woman could be evicted from her home of more than 50 years for missing one tax payment of \$572 on her South Hanover Twp. property.

Helene Shue's red farmhouse and 41 acres of land along Route 39 -- about two miles from Hersheypark -- were appraised at \$800,000, said her nephew, Jeff Arndt. The property was sold in September at a sheriff's sale for \$15,000.

Arndt said he and his aunt were not aware that the county was seeking to recoup a portion of the 2001 taxes until an anonymous caller tipped him off Monday night.

"He told us the property had already been sold," Arndt said. "The Lord laid it on his heart to tell me about it."

Arndt has hired an attorney, and filed a legal challenge of the sale yesterday. The petition states that the taxes were paid in full every other year, including this year.

Dauphin County's tax bureau made repeated attempts to collect the 2001 payment before selling the property, said Jennifer Kocher, a county spokeswoman. Several notices were sent seeking payment, and two notices were posted on the front door of her house, Kocher said.

"There's a very strict procedure we must follow that includes 12 notifications," Kocher said. "We followed the letter of the law to a T."

The \$572 owed in back taxes represents part of what is owed for 2001, Kocher said. County records confirm that Shue paid all her subsequent tax bills in full, she said.

Arndt said Shue did attempt to pay the \$572 in question. But he said the check was returned with a form letter from the tax bureau explaining that the payment should be made by certified check or money order.

When asked about Arndt's claims that his aunt's check was returned, Kocher said, "He's welcome to present all these things in court."

Property owners can contest a sheriff's sale in Dauphin County Court, Kocher said. A hearing is usually scheduled a few weeks after an objection is filed.

Arndt said the property was deeded to his aunt and his uncle, Clayton, in 1948, but the county records only list the deed in his uncle's name. He said the tax bureau sent delinquent-tax notification letters addressed to his uncle, who died four years ago.

Kocher said the county began the notification process in March 2002, when three certified letters were sent to Clayton Shue. Other letters were sent this year, advising of the pending sale.

Kocher said all certified letters were returned to the bureau unopened. Letters were sent by regular mail, which were not returned, she said.

"We don't investigate who the owners of those properties are," Kocher said. "We had no way of knowing whether there was a problem on their end or whether they were ignoring it."

Written notices were twice posted on the front of the house, in September 2002 and in September 2003, Kocher said. One official posts the notices, and another is required to accompany him as a witness.

The impending sale was listed in The Patriot-News in a legal advertisement in September.

The entire Shue parcel was sold to Philip Dobson of Middle Paxton Twp., a developer, on Sept. 25, Kocher said.

Dobson said he has not been notified that the sale is being contested. "I'm just a purchaser at a public auction, and I paid my money and that's all I can say," he said.

The property is near land being developed for residential housing.

Arndt said that since his uncle died, his aunt has become reclusive and wary of strangers. Helene Shue declined to discuss the situation.

But her nephew said her only wish is to live her remaining days in the home she shared with her husband.

"Her farm means everything to her," Arndt said. "It's life and death to her. She won't move off of it. She's been offered one million bucks for it and she refused."

Arndt, who is heir to his aunt's property, said the sale was "morally and legally" flawed and that an elderly woman should not

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be expected to understand the legal process. He said he has tried to explain to her what has transpired. "She understands that something terrible is about to happen and that I'm going to do something about it," he said.

Arndt said he worries that other older homeowners could lose their homes in a similar fashion. "We need to make this known to the public and we need to get the legislators in on this," he said. "There are other people who have to be protected."

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