



County of Fresno

Oscar J. Garcia, CPA

Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector

July 23, 2025

The Honorable Judge Houry A. Sanderson, Presiding Judge
Fresno County Superior Court
1100 Van Ness Avenue
Fresno, CA 93724-0002

Reference: Response to Fresno County Grand Jury Final Report No. 2 Titled, "Special assessment transparency on the Fresno County property tax bill: How can it be improved?"

Dear Judge Sanderson:

The County of Fresno Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector (Auditor's Office) is providing its response to the above-referenced Grand Jury Report (Report). The Auditor's Office agrees that providing a transparent property tax bill to constituents is both valuable and important. The Auditor's Office is working to implement some of the Grand Jury's recommendations and is committed to enhancing transparency, accuracy, and public service in all aspects of property tax administration.

As directed by the Grand Jury, the responses below are provided in accordance with Section 933.05, subdivision (a) and (b), of the California Penal Code.

Findings:

F1. Over the last 30 years, many changes have been made to Fresno County property tax bills; however, bill complexity has increased with a corresponding decrease in transparency as more special assessments appear on property tax bills.

F1: The Auditor's Office partially agrees with this finding, acknowledging that the property tax bill underwent several changes. All additions to the bills represent the Auditor's Office's attempt to provide further assistance and information to the public. While the content may be considered complex, it is included to comply with Revenue and Taxation Code section 2611.6 and includes the items listed below:

- (a) The full value of locally assessed property, including assessments made for irrigation district purposes in accordance with Section 26625.1 of the Water Code.
- (b) The tax rate required by Article XIII A of the California Constitution.
- (c) The rate or dollar amount of taxes levied in excess of the 1-percent limitation to pay for voter-approved indebtedness incurred before July 1, 1978, or bonded indebtedness

AUDITOR-CONTROLLER/TREASURER-TAX COLLECTOR

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for the acquisition or improvement of real property approved by two-thirds of the voters on or after June 4, 1986.

(d) The amount of any special taxes and special assessments levied.

(e) The amount of any tax rate reduction pursuant to Section 96.8, with the notation: "Tax reduction by (name of jurisdiction)."

(f) The amount of any exemptions. Exemptions reimbursable by the state shall be shown separately.

(g) The total taxes due and payable on the property covered by the bill.

(h) Instructions on tendering payment, including the name and mailing address of the tax collector.

(i) The billing of any special purpose parcel tax as required by paragraph (2) of subdivision (b) of Section 53087.4 of the Government Code, or any successor to that paragraph.

(j) Information specifying all of the following:

(1) That if the taxpayer disagrees with the assessed value as shown on the tax bill, the taxpayer has the right to an informal assessment review by contacting the assessor's office.

(2) That if the taxpayer and the assessor are unable to agree on a proper assessed value pursuant to an informal assessment review, the taxpayer has the right to file an application for reduction in assessment for the following year with the county board of equalization or the assessment appeals board, as applicable, and the time period during which the application will be accepted.

(3) The address of the clerk of the county board of equalization or the assessment appeals board, as applicable, at which forms for an application for reduction in assessment may be obtained.

(4) That if an informal or formal assessment review is requested, relief from penalties shall apply only to the difference between the county assessor's final determination of value and the value on the assessment roll for the fiscal year covered.

(k) (1) If a school district in that county provides for an exemption for a qualified special tax pursuant to subdivision (b) of Section 50079 of the Government Code and contracts or enters into an agreement with the county to collect the qualified special tax within the district, information indicating that school district parcel tax exemption information is available on the tax collector's Internet Web site, including the URL of the tax collector's Internet Web site homepage.

(2) This subdivision shall only apply when the school district provides the information to the tax collector required by subdivision (e) of Section 50079 of the Government Code at least 90 days prior to the mailing or electronic transmittal of the county tax bill for that fiscal year. The tax collector shall not include on the county tax bill any hyperlink to a location on a school district Internet Web site that is invalid.

(l) This section shall become operative on January 1, 2020.

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F2. Preparation of property tax bills requires coordination between the offices of the Fresno County Assessor and the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector as well as school districts that have levied taxes on voter-approved bonds.

F2: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding.

F3. Due to the declining number of educational institutions teaching COBOL, the problem of maintaining and coding the Fresno County legacy property tax program will only increase over time.

F3: The Auditor's Office is aware of this issue regarding the declining number of institutions teaching COBOL and agrees with this finding. The Auditor's Office and the Fresno County Assessor's Office have been working collaboratively to seek out a new property tax system to replace the current COBOL-based legacy program, which has been in use since 1968 and presents increasing challenges for maintenance and transparency. The goal is to implement a replacement system that will better meet the needs of both offices and the public.

Since fiscal year 2024-25, both the Auditor's Office and the Assessor's Office jointly developed a Request for Proposal (RFP). That RFP is current active and accepting bids. As of the preparation of this response to the Grand Jury, the RFP will close on August 1, 2025, at 4:00 PM. Once the evaluation process is completed, recommendations will be presented to the Board of Supervisors for their decision no later than the end of this calendar year 2025. After that, a contract will need to be negotiated and approved, which will probably take several months, given the complexity of the matter. Even after a contract is approved, the Auditor's Office anticipates a significant period before full migration to a new system. In general, migrating between such complex systems, which are also crucial to core operations, is a difficult task that cannot and should not be done quickly or haphazardly. This effort is in direct response to the limitations and risks associated with continued reliance on COBOL, as well as the need for improved functionality in the property tax system.

F4. Personnel listed for informational contact on property tax bills are unable to provide specific information on special assessments to property owners because they can't understand the titles placed on the property tax bill by the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office.

F4: The Auditor's Office cannot agree or disagree with this finding, as we do not oversee personnel answering phones in other agencies. Schools and special districts provided these phone numbers to the Auditor's Office. It is expected that these numbers should be assigned by schools and special districts to individuals, groups, or offices with sufficient knowledge and authority to respond to inquiries about assessments or general obligation bonds (GOB) listed on the property tax bill.

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F5. Informational contact phone numbers placed on property tax bills to assist property tax owners with questions about special assessments are sometimes non-functional.

F5: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding. The Auditor's Office would like to first state that Revenue and Taxation Code section 2611.6 does not mandate the inclusion of phone numbers on the property tax bill as provided in F1, the Auditor's Office includes these phone numbers as provided by the schools and special districts with the intention to assist the public to better access information about bonds that those agencies issued. Those agencies are responsible to provide information about their bonds.

The Auditor's Office acknowledges that, as highlighted by the Grand Jury, some listed contacts have not always been functional phone numbers. To address this, the Auditor's Office is planning to send a formal letter to the Superintendent and School Board President requesting updated and accurate contact information, including phone numbers, website addresses, and other resources where the public can obtain more information about the different types of bonds. While requests for this information have been made in the past, the formal letter aims to improve transparency and ensure that property owners are directed to knowledgeable contacts who can assist with their inquiries.

F6. The website of the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office offers no searchable link to 'special assessment' when queried, and several pages of the website have remained non-functional throughout the duration of this investigation.

F6: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding. On the property tax bill, bonds and special assessments (also known as direct charges) have been listed under the column heading 'special assessment.' Attempting to use the website's search engine to find information for 'special assessment' would not yield related results. The information on direct charges and bond rates is published in the Tax Rate Book. We acknowledge that the publication link was broken at the time of the Grand Jury's investigation, but even if the link had been functioning, the current search functionality on the website does not index or retrieve information within the publication documents.

Regarding the website remaining non-functional throughout the duration of the investigation, the issue has been acknowledged and resolved.

F7. The 'County of Fresno Tax Rate Book,' compiled annually by the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office, provides a complete and properly titled listing of all outstanding bond obligations for Fresno County school districts.

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F7: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding. The County of Fresno Tax Rate Book is compiled annually by the Auditor's Office as a resource for the public. The preparation and publication of the Tax Rate Book is a longstanding practice of the Auditor's Office, but it is not mandated by law.

F8. The 2024 - 2025 version of the 'County of Fresno Tax Rate Book' was unavailable to Fresno County property owners at the time of the property tax bill issuance, and was still unavailable at the end of April 2025.

F8: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding. Annually, the County of Fresno Tax Rate Book is published on or around the end of January to the Fresno County website under the Publications page. The preparation and publication of the Tax Rate Book is a longstanding practice of the Auditor's Office, but it is not mandated by law.

On February 2, 2025, the first incident ticket was created, reporting to the Information Technology Services Department (ITSD) that access to the documents under the Publications page was unavailable. This was a technical issue that affected all documents on the Publications page, not just the Tax Rate Book. ITSD continued to work with the vendor to resolve the issue. On or before April 25, 2025, the Publications section of the County website was restored. These documents, including the County of Fresno Tax Rate Books, are now available for public access.

F9. The offices of the Fresno County Assessor and the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector are collaborating to identify an appropriate vendor to supply a client-based software system that will replace the COBOL-based legacy program.

F9: The Auditor's Office agrees with this finding. The Auditor's Office and the Assessor's Office have put out an RFP for a vendor(s) for a new property tax system. See our response to F3 regarding the RFP process.

F10. The 2023-2024 'County of Fresno Tax Rate Book' is compiled in a manner such that additional information (dollar amount of bond, year of bond maturity) could be easily inserted into the tax rate tables for voter-approved bond obligations.

F10: The Auditor's Office partially agrees with this finding. We concur that the County of Fresno Tax Rate Book serves as a comprehensive reference document, providing detailed information on all property tax rates, special assessments, and related fiscal data applicable within Fresno County for each fiscal year. The preparation and publication of the Tax Rate Book is a longstanding practice of the Auditor's Office, though it is not mandated by law.

The current electronic format of the Tax Rate Book does allow for expanded descriptions and the potential inclusion of additional information. While it is technically possible to add data fields such as the “dollar amount of bonds” and “year of bond maturity” to the Tax Rate Book, entities that issue general obligation bonds are obligated to publicly disclose the amounts issued and their maturity dates. Those obligations include publicly disclosing detailed information on the Electronic Municipal Market Access (EMMA) database, which is freely available online at <https://emma.msrb.org/>. That is the primary source for disclosure information about municipal bonds, and it is where members of the public, whether investors or taxpayers, should go to find such information. Further, the information is more complex than can be set forth in three simple columns as proposed by the Grand Jury. For example, bond issuances often have a range of maturity dates, depending on how they are structured. This complex information is not well-suited for inclusion in the Tax Rate Book. Additionally, the inclusion of such information in the Tax Rate Book would require significant resources that the Auditor’s Office currently does not have.

The Auditor’s Office would consider providing this information should a new property tax system offer such capabilities. See our response to F3 regarding the RFP process for a new property tax system.

For these reasons, the Auditor’s Office does not fully agree with the assertion that such information “could be easily inserted into the tax rate tables” without potential drawbacks.

Recommendations:

- R1. The Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector should prioritize and acquire a new software system that will replace the COBOL-based system currently used. The software should be acquired by June 30, 2026. (F1 - F3, F9)**

R1: The Auditor’s Office has implemented this recommendation. On June 27, 2025, the Assessor’s Office, in collaboration with the Auditor’s Office and with the assistance of the County Purchasing Department, issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for a new property tax system. This marks a significant step forward in replacing the legacy COBOL-based system and improving the County’s property tax operations.

See our response to F3 regarding the RFP process for a new property tax system.

- R2. As a measure to improve transparency, the Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office should implement the following additions to Fresno County property tax bills: 1) Columns and associated data for ‘Start Date,’ ‘Dollar Amount,’ and ‘Maturity Date’ should be added for all special assessment line items. 2) Internet address printed on bill stock directing property owners to a functional ‘Sample Tax Bills and Notices’ webpage at the Fresno County Auditor-**

Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office website. These changes to the Fresno County property tax bill should be implemented by December 1, 2025. (F3, F6)

R2: The Auditor's Office will not be implementing this recommendation because it is not reasonable. The Auditor's Office understands the reasoning behind the Grand Jury's recommendation; however, due to system limitations, fulfilling such a request would require significant resources from our office to continually research information that is already freely and publicly available from a more appropriate source, namely the EMMA system. (See our response to F10, above.) Further, the information is more complex than can be set forth in three simple columns as proposed by the Grand Jury. For example, bond issuances often have a range of maturity dates, depending on how they are structured. This complex information is not well-suited for inclusion in property tax bills that are already required by law to include a significant amount of information. In addition, the proposed additions, specifically, the inclusion of columns and associated data for "Start Date," "Dollar Amount," and "Maturity Date" for all special assessment line items, as well as the printing of an internet address for a sample tax bills webpage, are not requirements under Revenue and Taxation Code. Section 2611.6 of the Revenue and Taxation Code specifies the information that must appear on the property tax bill, such as the full value of locally assessed property, tax rates, the amount of any special taxes and assessments, exemptions, and total taxes due, among other items. It does not require the additional data fields or web address as outlined in the recommendation.

Nonetheless, the Auditor's Office recognizes the importance of transparency and public access to information. The Auditor's Office would consider providing some additional information should a new property tax system offer such capabilities. See our response to F3 regarding the RFP process for a new property tax system.

R3. The Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office should repair and update the website (Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector - County of Fresno) to provide better transparency for property owners. Repairs and updates should at the minimum include:

- 1) A webpage or partial webpage that provides information about special assessments that is also linked to a functional 'Sample Tax Bills and Notices' webpage.**
- 2) A question / answer on the 'Frequently Asked Questions' webpage relative to special assessments, noting where to find more information.**
- 3) A functioning link to the 'Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector document library for public resources' (ACTTC Publications - County of Fresno).**
- 4) A functioning link to the current County of Fresno Tax Rate Book. These repairs and updates should be completed no later than October 1, 2025. (F1, F6)**

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R3: The Auditor's Office has implemented some of these recommendations. The recommended item that will be implemented, will be implemented within six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report. Items that the Auditor's Office will not be implemented, the explanation have been provided.

For R3 #1, the Auditor's Office is planning to include an updated page on the County's website that will display the full names corresponding to the abbreviated special assessment titles to better assist the public. This page or document will be made available when the annual secured tax bills are mailed out. Additionally, the Auditor's Office will communicate with the School Board President and Superintendent to request information on where resources regarding bond amounts and bond maturity dates are accessible to the public.

For R3 #2, The Auditor's Office will add a question and answer to the Frequently Asked Questions webpage to guide the public to the published list of special assessment abbreviations and their corresponding full names.

For R3, #3, as stated in F8 above the recommendation has been implemented.

For R3, #4, as mentioned in our response to F7, the Tax Rate Book is not mandated by law and will be completed based on staff availability, given the limited resources of the Auditor's Office.

R4. The Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office should examine and update annually the contact phone numbers of all 5000 series tax code entities on the Fresno County property tax bill and in the County of Fresno Tax Rate Book. These examinations and updates should be completed by November 1, 2025. (F5)

R4: The Auditor's Office will not be implementing the recommendation because it is not warranted as stated, but an alternative solution will be pursued. The Auditor's Office recognizes that while the inclusion of contact phone numbers for all 5000 series tax code entities on the property tax bill and in the County of Fresno Tax Rate Book is not a legal requirement, it remains an important practice to support public access and transparency. As part of this practice, the Auditor's Office has begun including phone numbers for these entities whenever it is provided by the entities to assist property owners in reaching the appropriate entities.

The Auditor's Office has been annually requesting the schools and special districts to provide updates to the contact phone numbers and makes the changes when the requests are received. To further enhance this effort, our office plans to send a formal letter to the School Board President and the School Superintendent requesting updated and active phone numbers for their districts. Additionally, we will ask for information on where the public can access bond-related resources, such as bond amounts and maturity dates, on their websites. This outreach aims to ensure that the contact information we provide is accurate, current, and useful to the public.

- R5. The Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office should provide a key / legend for the special assessment codes appearing on property tax bills to all school districts levying taxes for bond obligations that will assist school district contact personnel in providing information to property owners. This key / legend should be made available by October 1, 2025. (F4)**

R5: The Auditor's Office has not yet implemented this recommendation but will implement it within six months from the date of publication of the Grand Jury report. While the Grand Jury recommended a deadline of October 1, this timeline is too constrained given the timing of our annual property tax bill process, which spans from September through October. This action is in direct response to the Grand Jury's finding that both property owners and taxing agencies including school district personnel have had trouble interpreting the abbreviated special assessment codes and titles that appear on property tax bills due to system limitations.

To address this, the Auditor's Office is planning to include an updated page or document on the County's website that will display the full names corresponding to the abbreviated special assessment titles, to better assist the public. This page or document will be made available at the time the annual secured tax bills are mailed out. Additionally, a notice will be sent to all applicable taxing agencies and school districts directing them to the location of this information on the County website, so that these entities personnel can more effectively assist property owners with related inquiries.

- R6. The Fresno County Auditor-Controller / Treasurer-Tax Collector's Office should modify the new and subsequently printed versions of 'County of Fresno Tax Rate Book' to include 'Dollar Amount,' and 'Maturity Date' columns and associated data in both the secured and unsecured tax rate tables to improve transparency. The new information should be included in the tables by November 1, 2025. (F1, F7, F8, F10)**

R6: The recommendation will not be implemented because it is not reasonable. The Auditor's Office acknowledges the Grand Jury's recommendation and supports the goal of improving transparency in property tax administration. However, due to current system limitations and limited resources, the inclusion of "Dollar Amount" and "Maturity Date" columns in the secured and unsecured tax rate tables of the *County of Fresno Tax Rate Book* is not feasible currently.

We are hopeful that a new property tax system will provide the necessary capabilities to incorporate some of this data. Our office, in collaboration with the Assessor's Office and County Purchasing, has issued an RFP for a new property tax system. See our response to F3 regarding the RFP process for a new property tax system.

Despite these challenges, the Auditor's Office remains committed to enhancing transparency and public access to property tax information. We will continue to collaborate with relevant agencies and explore best practices to identify opportunities for future improvements.

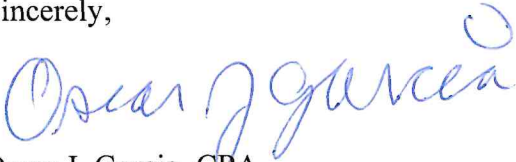
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We appreciate the Grand Jury's recommendation and will revisit the feasibility of this enhancement as system capabilities and resources evolve.

This concludes the Fresno County Auditor-Controller/Treasurer-Tax Collector's responses to the findings and recommendations of the 2024-25 Grand Jury Report No. 2.

Sincerely,



Oscar J. Garcia, CPA
Auditor-Controller/Treasurer Tax Collector

cc: Amy Ryals, Senior Administrative Analyst, County Administrative Office

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