

The Property-Tax Appeal Fee Math Report

What Cook County homeowners can give up when "no upfront fee" turns into 25%-35% of savings

Published: May 7, 2026 Prepared by: Censum Source check: May 8, 2026 CDT Companion data file: docs/whitepapers/property_tax_fee_math_metrics_20260507.csv

Censum is independent and is not affiliated with Cook County or any government agency. This report is pricing education and model-based analysis, not legal, tax, or financial advice. A Censum review-watch signal is not a guarantee of assessment reduction, appeal success, or tax savings.

Executive Summary

"No upfront fee" is not the same thing as "low cost."

Many property-tax appeal services use a percentage-of-savings model. That can be a fair trade when a homeowner wants convenience and understands the contract. But it can also hide the most important question:

If the appeal works, how much of the result do I actually keep?

Ownwell's public FAQ, checked May 7, 2026, says homeowners may pay 25%-35% of actual property-tax savings depending on state. Its public example says a \$1,000 reduction at a 25% fee produces a \$250 invoice.

Cook County's own public materials say homeowners do not need an attorney to file an Assessor appeal and that there is no fee involved at the Assessor's Office. The Cook County Board of Review also says residential property owners do not need an attorney and may represent themselves.

Censum analyzed 1,587,827 Class 2 residential PINs in its 2025 Cook County residential assessment snapshot. Among 524,084 PINs in Censum's review-watch band, the modeled first-year savings pool was \$654.1 million. If every one of those modeled savings outcomes were handled under a 25%-35% percentage-of-savings service, the illustrative first-year fee pool would be:

Scenario	Review-watch PINs	Modeled first-year savings	Fee at 25%	Fee at 30%	Fee at 35%
Review-watch band	524,084	\$654.1M	\$163.5M	\$196.2M	\$228.9M
Higher-confidence band	154,470	\$199.9M	\$50.0M	\$60.0M	\$70.0M

This does not mean every property should appeal, every appeal would win, or every homeowner would use a percentage-fee service. It means the fee model deserves to be visible before the homeowner signs.

Why This Matters Now

Cook County property-tax appeals already have an equity problem. In May 2025, the Cook County Treasurer reported that successful business appeals shifted nearly \$2 billion in property taxes onto homeowners over three years. The same release said businesses appealed nearly 64% of the time while homeowners appealed 27% of the time.

That is the system-level story.

The household-level story is smaller but just as practical: homeowners who do appeal often choose between doing it themselves, hiring a professional on contingency, or buying fixed-price help to understand the evidence. Most people compare "pay now" against "pay nothing now." The better comparison is:

What am I paying if this works?

Key Findings

1. One-third of Class 2 residential PINs landed in Censum's review-watch band.

Censum's model placed 524,084 of 1,587,827 Class 2 residential PINs, or about 33.0%, in the review-watch band. The review-watch band means the property showed enough model signal and positive estimated annual savings that the homeowner should take a closer look before assuming the assessment is fair.

2. The modeled first-year savings pool is large enough that fee math matters.

Across review-watch PINs, Censum estimated \$654.1 million in modeled first-year savings. A 25% fee against that pool is \$163.5 million. A 35% fee is \$228.9 million.

This is not a prediction that every appeal will win. It is a way to size the economic decision homeowners are making when they choose a pricing model.

3. The largest group is not tiny savings.

The biggest review-watch savings band was \$1,000-\$1,999 in modeled annual savings.

Modeled first-year savings band	Review-watch PINs	Modeled first-year savings	Fee at 25%	Fee at 35%
Under \$500	82,187	\$28.4M	\$7.1M	\$9.9M
\$500-\$999	146,955	\$108.4M	\$27.1M	\$37.9M
\$1,000-\$1,999	226,772	\$314.6M	\$78.6M	\$110.1M
\$2,000-\$4,999	64,159	\$174.5M	\$43.6M	\$61.1M
\$5,000+	4,011	\$28.2M	\$7.0M	\$9.9M

For a homeowner with \$1,500 in first-year savings, a 25% fee is \$375 and a 35% fee is \$525. If the work required is complex and the homeowner wants full handling, that may be acceptable. If the case is straightforward, that fee may be more than the homeowner needed to pay.

4. Fee exposure is not evenly distributed by township.

Some townships show large fee exposure because they have many review-watch homes. Others show it because modeled savings per property are higher.

Township	Review-watch PINs	Modeled first-year savings	Fee at 25%	Avg. modeled savings
Jefferson	46,513	\$46.9M	\$11.7M	\$1,009
Wheeling	26,489	\$45.3M	\$11.3M	\$1,711
New Trier	11,233	\$43.0M	\$10.7M	\$3,828
Lake	85,228	\$42.5M	\$10.6M	\$499
Maine	22,456	\$39.2M	\$9.8M	\$1,747
Schaumburg	24,417	\$36.8M	\$9.2M	\$1,509
Palatine	18,620	\$33.3M	\$8.3M	\$1,788
West Chicago	32,044	\$30.0M	\$7.5M	\$937
Northfield	11,609	\$29.2M	\$7.3M	\$2,511
Hanover	18,254	\$27.4M	\$6.9M	\$1,503

The Fee Math Homeowners Should Run

The math is simple, but most people do it too late.

First-year savings	25% fee	30% fee	35% fee	Homeowner keeps at 25%
\$500	\$125	\$150	\$175	\$375
\$1,000	\$250	\$300	\$350	\$750
\$2,000	\$500	\$600	\$700	\$1,500
\$5,000	\$1,250	\$1,500	\$1,750	\$3,750

The issue is not whether contingency pricing is bad. It is not automatically bad. The issue is whether the homeowner understands the trade before signing.

Three Homeowner Scenarios

The same fee model can feel very different depending on the property and the work required.

Homeowner situation	First-year savings	35% fee	What to ask before signing
Small record or exemption-adjacent issue	\$500	\$175	Is this really an assessment appeal, or is a record/exemption correction the better path?
Straightforward comparable-property case	\$1,500	\$525	Would a fixed-price evidence review give me enough confidence before I give up a percentage?
Larger overvaluation signal	\$5,000	\$1,750	Is the case complex enough to justify percentage pricing, or am I paying a large success fee for a simple filing?

The point is not to shame any one pricing model. The point is to make the trade visible. A homeowner who chooses full-service percentage help after seeing the math is making an informed decision. A homeowner who signs because "no upfront fee" sounds free is not.

DIY, Fixed-Fee, And Percentage Help Are Different Products

Homeowners often compare appeal help as if every option is trying to do the same job. It is cleaner to separate the products:

1. **DIY filing** Lowest cash cost, highest responsibility. Works best when the homeowner is comfortable with deadlines, records, and evidence.
1. **Fixed-fee evidence help** A middle path. The homeowner pays for diagnosis, comparable-property review, record checks, and filing guidance without giving up a share of the result.
1. **Percentage-of-savings help** A convenience and risk-transfer product. It can make sense when the homeowner wants more handling, the case is complex, or the provider is doing work the homeowner truly would not do.

Those categories should not be blurred. "No upfront fee" is a billing structure, not proof that the total cost will be low.

Five Questions To Ask Before Signing A Percentage-Fee Agreement

1. What exact percentage applies in my county and property type?
2. Is the fee based only on one tax year, or can it apply to more than one period?
3. Are exemptions excluded from the savings calculation?
4. Who is actually doing the filing, and at which stage: Assessor, Board of Review, or later?
5. Could I start with a fixed-price evidence review before giving up a percentage of the result?

When Percentage Pricing May Be A Rational Choice

There are cases where paying a savings fee can be rational. A homeowner may be short on time, uncomfortable with county portals, facing a complicated property record, dealing with a hearing, or managing several properties. Convenience has value.

The decision gets weaker when:

- the provider cannot explain the stage being handled
- the fee can apply beyond the year the homeowner expected
- exemptions are not clearly excluded from the fee calculation
- the homeowner has a simple record error or obvious comparable-property case
- the homeowner never sees a flat-fee or DIY comparison

That is the practical consumer-protection issue: not "never pay a percentage," but "do not sign one without seeing the denominator."

Homeowner FAQ

Is a percentage-of-savings fee illegal or automatically unfair?

No. It can be a legitimate pricing model. The concern is transparency. A homeowner should understand the exact percentage, what counts as savings, which tax year applies, and whether exemptions are excluded.

Why does the first-year savings number matter?

Most homeowners think in terms of the bill they are trying to reduce. The fee usually comes out of that same benefit. If the first-year savings are \$2,000 and the fee is 35%, the homeowner keeps \$1,300 before considering any other costs.

Does free filing mean help should always be free?

No. Professional help can create value. Cook County filing being free simply means the homeowner should not confuse the government filing cost with the private-help cost.

What is the cleanest decision rule?

If the evidence is simple and the savings look meaningful, compare fixed-fee help before signing away a percentage. If the evidence is complex or the homeowner wants full handling, percentage help may still be worth it.

Why Reporters Should Care

This is a consumer-finance story hiding inside a property-tax story.

Cook County's appeal system already creates burden-shift and participation problems. Homeowners with less time, less knowledge, or less confidence may skip appeals entirely. Others may sign a "no upfront fee" agreement without realizing how much they are giving up if the appeal succeeds.

Defensible headlines include:

- The hidden cost of "no upfront fee" property-tax appeals in Cook County.
- Census analysis sizes the modeled fee pool behind percentage-of-savings appeal services.
- In Cook County, filing may be free, but homeowners can still give up hundreds or thousands if they sign the wrong help agreement.
- Why homeowners should run fee math before hiring property-tax appeal help.

Censum Quote

"The point is not that every homeowner should file alone. Some people need help and should pay for it. The point is that no one should confuse no upfront fee with no meaningful cost. If an appeal has a strong signal, the pricing model can decide who keeps the value."

Methodology

Censum analyzed its 2025 Cook County residential assessment snapshot for Class 2 residential PINs. Class 2 includes detached single-family homes, townhomes, condominiums, cooperatives, and residential buildings with no more than six dwelling units under Cook County Assessor public guidance.

The analysis included 1,587,827 Class 2 residential PINs with positive modeled annual savings. Censum's review-watch band includes PINs with model probability of 0.55 or higher and positive estimated annual savings. The higher-confidence band includes PINs with model probability of 0.70 or higher.

Fee exposure is calculated by applying 25%, 30%, and 35% fee assumptions to modeled first-year savings. These assumptions come from public percentage-fee examples and ranges published by property-tax appeal services. Fee exposure is illustrative. It is not a projection of actual fees paid, actual appeal wins, actual savings, or actual market share by any company.

Limitations:

- Modeled savings are not guaranteed tax savings.
- A review-watch signal is not a filing recommendation.
- Actual appeal outcomes depend on current records, deadlines, evidence, exemptions, and county review.
- Fee terms vary by provider, state, county, contract, property type, appeal stage, and year.
- Homeowners should read the agreement before signing and should verify current county deadlines.
- Censum is not affiliated with Cook County or any government agency.

Sources

- [Ownwell pricing page](#)
- [Ownwell FAQ page](#)
- [Cook County Assessor, 2022 Property Tax Bill Assistance](#)
- [Cook County Assessor, Frequently Asked Questions](#)
- [Cook County Assessor, Appeal Descriptions](#)
- [Cook County Board of Review, How to Present a Case Based on Lack of Uniformity](#)
- [Cook County Treasurer, "\\$2 billion wealth transfer" release](#)
- [Cook County Treasurer, A Broken Property Tax Appeals System](#)