

## **How *The Austin Bulldog* Investigated Residence Homestead Exemptions**

Twenty-three public information requests, more than a million records, and months of concerted effort were involved in this groundbreaking investigative project

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The investigation of possibly inappropriate residential homestead exemptions began with the acquisition and analysis of a database of all residential properties that have been granted tax exemptions by the Travis Central Appraisal District. That database, obtained June 20, 2013, with a public information request, contained records of more than 264,000 properties located in Travis County that have residential tax exemptions.

Our analysis initially focused on the hundreds of properties in the database that shared a common mailing address.

We filed multiple public information requests to obtain copies of each Application for Residence Homestead Exemption, Form 50-114 or equivalent, submitted to the Appraisal District by these property owners and scrutinized these forms.—more than 500 in all.

We eliminated from the database of possibly inappropriate exemptions all owners who had purchased one of the properties in 2013 and properties that are contiguous to the homestead.

Our analysis involved reading the deed records for each property to identify the legal owners and, when indicated, the marital status and relationship of the owners at the time the residence was purchased.

Records of property owners' marriages were also researched through the Travis County Clerk's [Marriage and Domestic Partnership Search](#) website; the online database maintained by Houston-based [Courthousedirect.com](#); and indexes of [Marriage License Applications](#) maintained by the Texas Department of State Health Services.

Records of divorces were researched through the public-access computers in the Travis County District Clerk's office; the online database maintained by Houston-based [Courthousedirect.com](http://Courthousedirect.com); and the online [Report of Divorces](#) maintained by the Texas Department of State Health Services.

The occupants of each property were sought with reverse-address searches via [whitepages.com](http://whitepages.com), which lists the names and in some cases the approximate ages and listed telephone numbers. Although not conclusive, these telephone listings provided a window into whether homeowners were residing at the address where they had a homestead exemption.

The residents of each property were further researched with a database of more than 607,000 registered Travis County voters obtained June 6, 2013, with a public information request. Reverse-address searches in this database led to identifying the residents of homes with homestead exemptions, including both owners and non-owners. Voter registration records were also researched through the Travis County [Voter Verification](#) website.

For residences served by the City of Austin's water and wastewater utility, the person who is billed for these services was identified with a reverse-address search of a database of more than 330,000 customers obtained October 11, 2013, through a public information request.

Residences registered with the City of Austin for use as Short-Term Rentals were identified with a database of more than 650 such properties obtained September 3, 2013, with a public information request.

Residential property owners with homestead exemptions in Travis County and a mailing address in Bexar, Dallas, Houston, Tarrant or Williamson County were researched through the appraisal districts in those counties to identify owners who have exemptions in multiple counties.