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Richland businesses targeted over taxes

Treasurer seeks overdue taxes on equipment

By TIM FLACH - tflach@thestate.com

Richland County Treasurer David Adams is going after 1,457 businesses that he says owe \$4.8 million in overdue property taxes on equipment.

Adams is warning the companies to pay up by April 1 or be identified publicly and face losing their business licenses.

"We're trying to find folks skating around the edges," he said. "This is giving them a last chance."

His warning is going to firms whose taxes remain unpaid for a year or more.

The overdue amounts are owed to the county, Richland 1 and Richland 2 schools and Columbia, Forest Acres, Blythewood and Arcadia Lakes.

An unknown number of the companies probably are defunct and owe nothing, but any in operation with overdue taxes are "intentionally defrauding the system," Adams said.

His office doesn't enforce collection of business taxes but is undertaking the crackdown in a partnership with municipalities seeking assistance.

"Anything that can add teeth to our efforts is welcome," Columbia business license administrator Brenda Kyzer said.

Like most municipalities, her staff members make sure taxes are up-to-date before issuing new licenses.

About 24,000 businesses are in Richland County.

In Lexington County, lists of businesses with delinquent taxes on equipment are turned over periodically to 12 municipalities to help with collection through loss of business licenses. The number of delinquencies and amounts due countywide aren't totaled.

Collection efforts through revocation of business licenses are time-consuming and often fruitless, some municipal officials said.

"It's a lot of work for a little bit," Cayce city manager Johnny Sharpe said.

Meanwhile, overdue taxes on homes in Richland County grew by 1,050 residences in 2008 - the latest information available - to 14,872 residences now, records show. While the total is higher, the delinquency rate of 9 percent has been nearly the same since 2005 as the number of parcels increases.

Balances on 2009 residential taxes can be paid through March 15 before becoming delinquent, although those paid since Jan. 15 carry a penalty.

Both residential and commercial parcels can be sold for over-due taxes, although owners are given a chance to pay up and re-claim the tracts.

Reach Flach at (803) 771-8483.