

Report: Real estate used to secure Texas bail bonds often fall short of bail amount

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DALLAS — The value of real estate accepted by Texas bail bondsmen as collateral for the bonds they write often falls short of covering the amount of the bail, according to a newspaper study.

The Texas Occupations Code allows bail bondsmen to issue bonds worth up to 10 times the value of the collateralized real estate in the state's larger counties. As a result, counties often collect cents on the dollar from bond forfeitures, The Dallas Morning News (<http://dallasne.ws/sHfuZm>) reported in Sunday's editions.

Tarrant County has tried to sell some forfeited properties and received no bids, said Assistant District Attorney David Hudson, who advises the county bail bond board. He said he would favor "some kind of neutral authority" to set the values of real estate collateral, rather than private appraisers working for the bail bondsmen.

"But the bail bondsmen are very influential in writing these laws," he told the newspaper. "The bondsmen are the ones who are giving to the politicians, so they get what they want to a certain degree."

Bail bondsman L.G. Cornish Jr. runs his business from a converted house in the Fort Worth suburb of Haltom City. He uses the 1,220-square-foot office to secure his bail bonds and has told the Tarrant County Bail Bond Board that a private appraiser valued it at \$115,000.

A few months later, when he protested the taxable value reached by the county appraisal board, his agent claimed the building was worth \$40,502, the newspaper reported.

However, state law requires the bail bond board to accept Cornish's private appraisal and to allow him to write bail bonds worth 10 times that value — up to \$1.15 million.

"Either way is legal," Cornish told The News. He said he saw nothing wrong with using one value for the bail bond board and placing a much smaller one before the appraisal district review board.

"So if I were able to lower my taxes, I think I've made a good deal and I don't think anybody should criticize me for it," he said.

In fact, he has protested the appraisal district's lower values three times in recent years. This year, he initially protested the \$52,500 value but eventually dropped his complaint.

One of the biggest bail bond companies in Dallas County, Delta Bail Bonds, submitted a \$525,000 appraisal of a property to the Dallas County Bail Bond Board to secure its bonds. When the county appraisal district valued it at \$533,660 for tax purposes, owner Charles Monroe protested, pointing out that the second floor was used to store air-conditioning equipment and was unusable. The appraisal district review board lowered the appraisal to \$233,130.

"What it is and how it's used are two radically different things," said Mark Monroe, the owner's nephew and Delta's general manager. "It's up there, but it's unused," he told the newspaper.

The newspaper used open records requests to obtain data on real estate pledged as collateral for bail bonds in Dallas, Tarrant and Collin counties.