

# Pinellas/north

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## County, Scientology continue tax talks

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CLEARWATER — No end is in sight in negotiations between Pinellas County and the Church of Scientology over the church's \$5 million tax bill.

Neither side would talk about the negotiations taking place in front of a court-appointed mediator. Mediator William Fleece adjourned the talks Monday, and the two sides may not meet again for months.

"If we had reached something, obviously we wouldn't have adjourned," Pinellas Property Appraiser Jim Smith said. "I



Smith

don't think we will lose anything by talking, but the issue is still there.

"Meanwhile, the penalties and interest keep accruing."

The church has based its worldwide spiritual headquarters in Clearwater's Fort Harrison Hotel since 1975.

In 1983, the church declared it would no longer pay property taxes. That's a big deal in a cash-strapped city where the church owns 11 properties worth more than \$22 million.

And the stakes are getting higher for the city. The church plans to build a \$42 million training center in the former Gray Moss Inn, across the street from the Fort Harrison Hotel. The 170,000-square-foot center will encompass nearly an entire city block.

The county always has denied the church's request for tax-exempt status, throwing the matter into court. Earlier this year, the county court system appointed Fleece, a former state legislator from St. Petersburg, to hear the case and make a non-binding recommendation.

Fleece now has met with the two sides twice in sessions closed to the public. He also placed a gag order on participants in the meetings.

"We've all got some things to think about," Fleece said Monday. No other meetings are scheduled.

Scientology is based mostly on the writings of science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard, author of "Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health."

Scientologists believe negative experiences hinder their personal development on earth. These experiences can be overcome, members say, through counseling sessions that, when spread out over years, can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Earlier this month, Time magazine wrote a story on the church that claimed Scientology was a "global racket" designed to make church leaders rich.

Officials with the church angrily disputed Time's charges, saying they planned to sue the magazine.

The Clearwater office of the church has tried in recent months to foster a better relationship with

### Properties in Pinellas County owned by the Church of Scientology

Property	Value	1990 Taxes
Fort Harrison Hotel 210 S. Fort Harrison	\$9,355,800	\$211,197.05
Former Elks Lodge 516 Franklin St.	\$226,800	\$5,119.87
Former bank building 500 Cleveland St.	\$355,200	\$8,018.00
Hacienda Gardens Apartment Complex 551 N. Saturn	\$5,060,400	\$109,175.00
Sand Castle Retreat Corner of Drew Street and Osceola Avenue	\$2,254,900	\$50,903.00
Former apartment complex 1024 Cleveland St.	\$824,200	\$18,605.82
Former bank building 118 N. Fort Harrison Ave.	\$707,000	\$15,980.10
Church annex 109 N. Fort Harrison Ave.	\$151,700	\$3,424.54
Church annex 25 N. Fort Harrison Ave.	\$142,400	\$3,214.59
Church building 15 N. Fort Harrison Ave.	\$227,100	\$5,126.00
Former hotel 702 Bayview Ave.	\$1,775,600	\$34,323.59
Total	\$21,080,900	\$465,067.56

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the city. In March, a Scientology spokesman said the church was willing to pay its fair share of taxes. The church will supply the ap-

praiser's office with information requested by Smith, said Paul B. Johnson, a Tampa attorney representing the Scientologists, after Monday's meeting. He wouldn't comment further.