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# Mediator will hear tax fight

■ Attorneys for the Church of Scientology and Pinellas County will meet Monday to see if they can avoid a lengthy court battle.

By CURTIS KRUEGER  
Times Staff Writer

CLEARWATER — Pinellas County and the Church of Scientology have been facing off for years, preparing for an epic court battle over whether the Scientologists should pay millions in local property taxes.

Attorneys for the county and the Scientologists will meet Monday, but not before a judge. Instead, they will meet behind closed doors, before a mediator.

Both sides want to see if there could be a way to settle the legal battle without the expense of a trial that could last months.

Critics call the Church of Scientology a cult; the current cover of *Time* magazine calls it "The Cult of Greed."

But members insist it is a bona-fide religion and that, like other churches, it should not have to pay most taxes.

The Scientologists own 11 properties in the Clearwater area, including the Fort Harrison Hotel,

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valued at \$9.2-million. Clearwater is considered the group's international spiritual headquarters.

Every year since 1982, the Scientologists have filed for a property tax exemption (except last year, when officials say they forgot). Every year, the county property appraiser's office has rejected their application. The Scientologists have gone to court to overturn the rulings.

The county maintains the Scientologists owe about \$4.5-million in back taxes.

Meeting with a mediator is a process that offers surprising chances for settling a lawsuit, attorneys for both sides said.

"Old-time lawyers like me, I thought the only way to handle it was to go to court and slug it out," said Paul B. Johnson, the Scientologists' attorney.

But recently, he said, "I've had several cases that I never thought would be resolved short of trial that were resolved" in mediation.

Assistant County Attorney Howard Bernstein said he has had the same experience, and said the mediator in this case, William H. Fleece, has a knack for helping resolve disputes.

The meeting Monday will be the second of two mediation sessions in the case.

Unlike a court hearing, a mediation session is closed. But Property Appraiser Jim Smith said if a settlement is reached, the final terms eventually will be made public.

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