Oconee bites political bullet on reassessment



Reassessment 2010:
The high price of pricing property

Hiring outside firm risky for officials

This is the conclusion of a four-part series exploring the reappraisal of properties in Oconee County.

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WALHALLA — Reassessment was a political hot potato in 2006.

At the time, residents and businesses were pleading with elected officials to delay reappraisals for a year that would have allowed property taxpayers to receive the benefit of major state tax reform in the works.



Dexter

A big part of that reform was a swap of school taxes in exchange for a 1-cent increase in the sales tax. Another component of the reform was a 15 percent cap on property values between reassessments every five years.

Despite the calls for a one-year delay, the Oconee County Council at the time chose to pass an ordinance to reassess as of Dec. 31, 2005. Instead of waiting for the state tax reform to take effect, that council chose implementation of reassessment in 2006.

At the time, current Council Chairman Reg Dexter had little or no interest in public office. That all changed when he saw that his tax bill had ballooned by 143 percent because of Council's decision.

Dexter said there were other issues that drew him into local politics, such as zoning. However, reassessment was a big issue for him because, as president of a property owners association, he had many angry homeowners in the group.

"I did not think that council was thinking of the people," Dexter said.

Four years later, the shoe is on the other foot.

Today, some are questioning the council's decision to outsource reassessment to a private company for $1.8 million.

Taxpayers are asking why Oconee is spending

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REASSESSMENT: All county properties will get onsite visit

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so much when most other counties in South Carolina have been getting their reassessments done every five years with the county employees in the Assessor's Office.

Neighboring Pickens County, for instance, is implementing its reassessment program this year at a cost of $24,000.

Yet, on the recommendation of Interim County Administrator Gene Klugh, the county requested bids from private firms to reappraise 62,500 residential and commercial properties in Oconee. Tyler Technologies, Inc., a leading provider of mass appraisal and property tax software, was chosen to do the job.

On March 30, the council voted 4-0 to approve a contract with Tyler that pays the company $1,825,422. Councilman Mario Suarez was not present at the time of the vote.

Asked if there could be political repercussions from the decision, Dexter said he did not know.

"This is a new thing for us," Dexter said.

Dexter admitted discussions took place on whether to ask for a one-year delay of reassessment, which is permitted by state law.

"We wanted to get it done so as not to make it look as if we are holding off until property values go up," Dexter said.

Indeed, Pickens County Assessor David Day said property values in his county have gone up less than 10 percent compared to more than 25 percent in previous reassessment periods.

Insiders say the $1.8 million to Tyler is probably justified because the Oconee County Assessor's Office has "terrible records" that have to be cleaned up. They say that while the office finally has excellent software that could produce efficient and cost effective reassessments as in Pickens County, it still lacks good data and procedures.

Dexter said this reassessment would mark the first time in 17 years that all county properties will receive an onsite visit.

"This is a new venture for us," Dexter said. "Past councils have not done anything."

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