

Real Property Assessment Administration Study

Cattaraugus County

March 2009

Prepared by *The Bukiewicz Organization*

Purpose of Study



Examine opportunities to make real property tax administration in the county more **equitable, efficient** and **transparent** to the taxpayer

“The biggest problem folks have with the property assessment process is understanding it”

“I would like to know the process of how an assessment is determined”

Concerned citizens survey responses

Methodology



Interviews

We met with 20 individuals from all key stakeholder groups



Surveys

We received 197 Internet survey responses
(Elected Officials, County Citizens, School Superintendents & Assessors)



Document Review

We reviewed key county and State documents and data

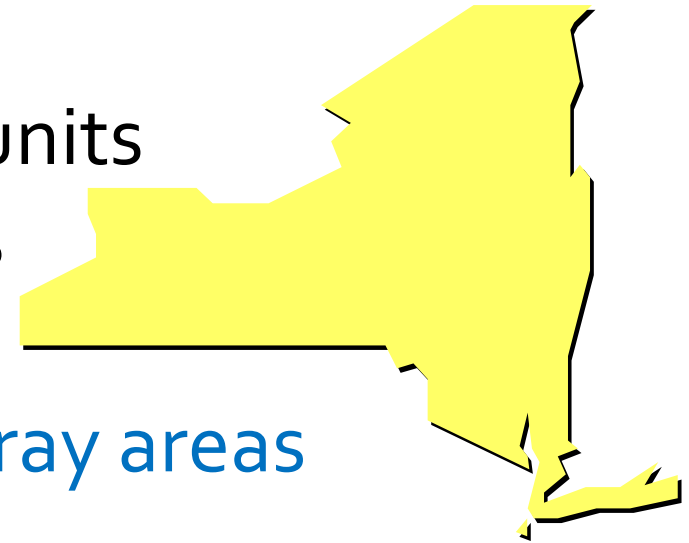
Discussion Groups

We conducted 3 meetings with 16 participants

A Complex Issue



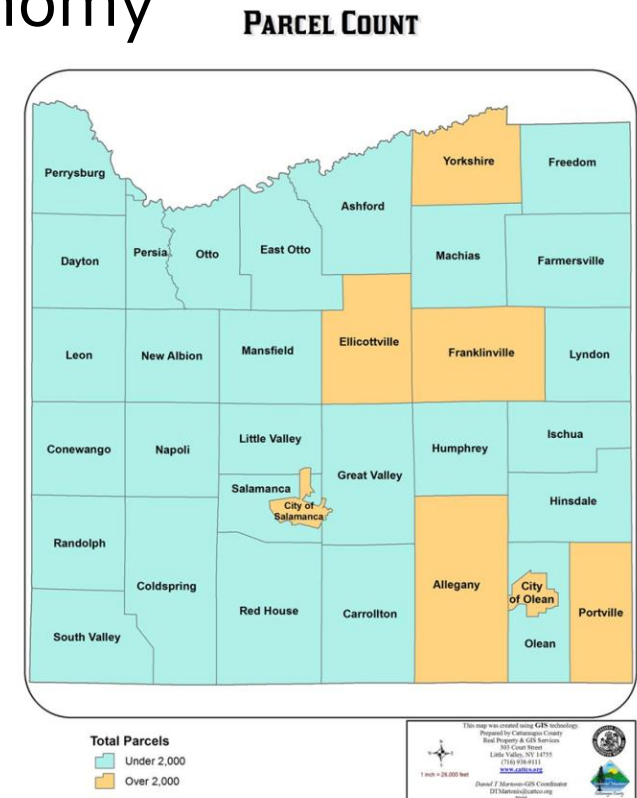
- Only 7 states have more than 500 assessing units – New York has 1,128
- Only 11 states do not require reassessment cycles – including New York
- 80% of New York's assessing units have fewer than 5,000 parcels
- New York State Real Property Law is confusing with many gray areas



Diverse County With Sometimes Conflicting Interests



- 32 towns, 2 cities & 14 villages
- Aging population & declining economy
- Urban & rural
- Developed & undeveloped
- Last reassessment anywhere from 1950 to 2008
- Levels of assessment ranging from 2.3% to 100%
- 80% of towns have fewer than 2000 parcels

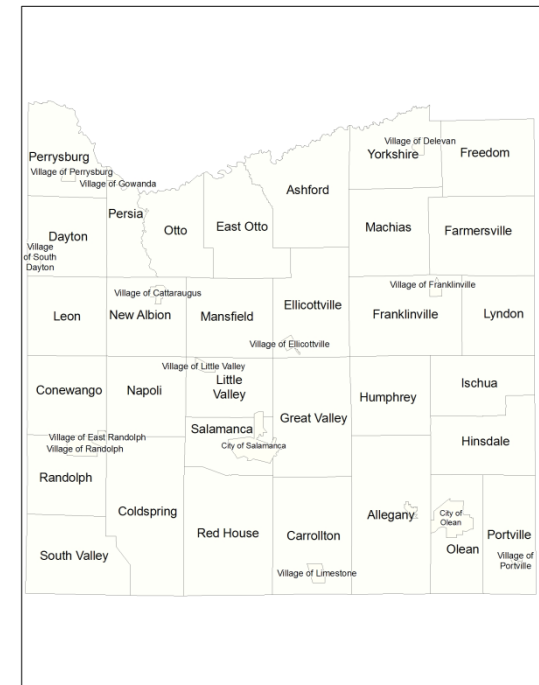


Current Situation



\$1.2 million is spent in Cattaraugus County on real property tax administration this year but ...

- 79% of citizen respondents said their elected official should be concerned about the wide disparity in levels of assessment in the county
- 73% thought assessment administration could be made more efficient
- 70% said the wide variation in the way property is assessed in the towns represents a basic unfairness to taxpayers
- 57% think there are towns in the county that intentionally keep their level of assessment down

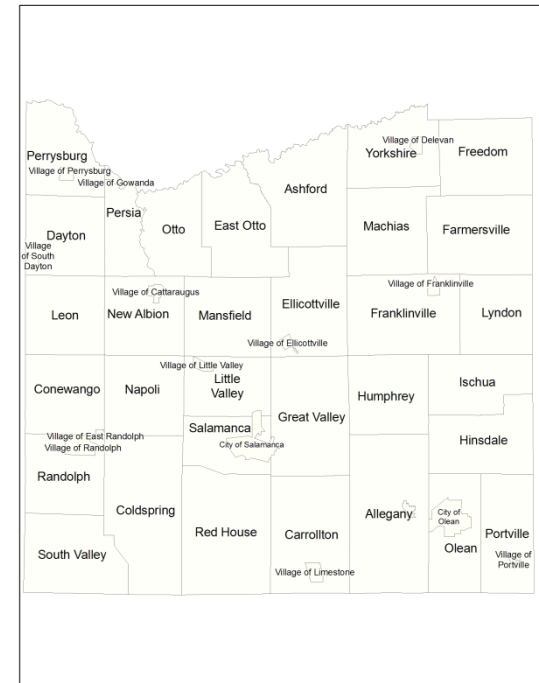


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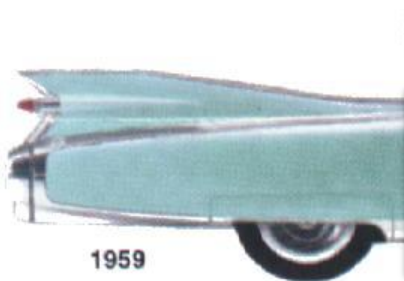
- Only 22% said their assessor does good work
- Only 19% were satisfied with their current level of assessment
- Only 15% said property assessment in their municipality is working fine and does not need change



Where Things Are Now



- Great inconsistency in the way towns assess
 - e.g. timber, pools, etc.
 - Wide range in levels of assessment -- 2.3% to 100%
 - Lack of uniformity person to person and class to class
- Great diversity in town recourses and needs
 - Smaller, more rural towns lack funds for reassessments
 - Varying levels of support for assessors by public officials



Last reassessments range from the 1950s to 2008
Fifty years ago Cadillacs had fins and got 14 MPG

What Can Be Done



1

**Improve
Municipal
Assessing**



**Each town manages its
own assessment practices**

2

**County -wide
Assessing**



**Establish a Chief Assessor
for the whole county with
staff to perform work**

3

**Coordinated
Assessment
Groups**



**Groups of like towns act as
a single assessing unit**

Improve Municipal Assessing



1

Improve
Municipal
Assessing

2

County Wide
Assessing

3

Coordinated
Assessment
Programs

Benefits

- Requires least amount of change
- Continues municipality autonomy
- County influence, not control

Costs

- Leaves citizen concerns unanswered
- Does not insure equity across the county
- Will result in large swings in tax apportionments

County-Wide Assessing



1

Improve
Municipal
Assessing

2

County-wide
Assessing

3

Coordinated
Assessment
Programs

Benefits

- Standardizes assessing practices and rates for the county
- Provides equity for all county taxpayers
- ORPS financial incentives

Costs

- Extremely difficult to implement per law
- High startup costs
- Potential for increased operating costs
- Limited accessibility for some

Coordinated Assessing Programs



1

Improve
Municipal
Assessing

2

County-wide
Assessing

3

Coordinated
Assessment
Programs

Benefits

- Reduces # of assessing units in the county
- ORPS financial incentives
- Promotes personnel & cost sharing

Costs

- Requires town board action
- May require state exceptions
- County may need to aid rural reassessments

What Can Be Done



1

Improve
Municipal
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Each of these approaches has its **benefits ...**
and **costs**

None offer a perfect solution

Where To Go From Here



County needs a **strategic plan** for real property assessment administration



with short, medium and long term goals



Some Examples of Strategic Goals



■ Short Term

- All assessors in the county are appointed
- All Boards of Assessors are replaced by sole appointed assessors

■ Mid-Term

- All towns store their data on the centralized county database

■ Long Term

- Create clusters of towns acting as one assessing unit
- Employ valuation/appraisal personnel at County level
- Move to county-wide assessing

Remember Purpose of This Study



Equity

Is every parcel in the county now treated the same way? **No.**

This study lays out options for improving that by:

- Improving assessing at the municipal level
- Taking steps to create more CAPs
- Switching to county-wide assessing



Remember Purpose of This Study



Transparency

Is the system easy for people to understand? **No.**

- NYS Real Property Tax Law is very confusing.
- Cattaraugus County taxpayers have at their fingertips the advantage of a website assessable 24/7
 - Lets them verify assessments throughout their municipalities
 - Allows them to hold assessors accountable



Remember Purpose of This Study



Efficiency

Is a system with no common statewide assessing standards and 34 independent assessing units in the county operating smoothly? **No.**

By using the data in this study Cattaraugus County can take steps to remedy some of that

- Improving assessing at the municipal level
- Taking steps to create more CAPs
- Switching to county-wide assessing



Strategic Planning Requires Leadership



County Level Leadership

- Big picture vision of how real property tax administration should be in the county
- Influence, not control



Town Level Leadership

- Operational guidance to make desired changes

A Final Suggestion



Recommend a half-day workshop for county legislators and town supervisors within the next 60 days to get the strategic plan started and moving forward

