

Colton Taxes Too Low?

Appraiser: Assessments Unfair To County, School, Others

By SUSAN MENDE

COLTON - A real estate appraiser from Canton wants the public to know that numerous homes in the town of Colton have significantly lower property assessments than their market value.

Robert J. "Bob" Hostetter, a state certified appraiser, claims that as a result of widespread inaccuracies, many Colton homeowners are not paying their share of school taxes to the Colton-Pierrepoint Central School District.

That's because the town of Pierrepoint assessments are closer to full market value. Also, Pierrepoint is undergoing another property revaluation this year.

Hostetter believes that many Colton homeowners are also not paying their share of St. Lawrence County taxes, result-

ing in higher county tax bills for the rest of the county.

"I just want to bring this to light. As an appraiser, I see properties that are not being fairly assessed in Colton. I want to bring that out to the public," Hostetter said.

He suggested that the Colton-Pierrepoint Central School District could improve its financial situation if Colton residents were contributing a larger portion to the school district's tax levy.

Hostetter researched county records to determine the selling price of Colton homes over the past few years, focusing on those selling for more than \$100,000.

He compared those selling prices with the full market value assessment as listed on the Town of Colton's 2007 assessment roll.

"It's an ethical dilemma. Doing the right thing may be political suicide"

- Jane B. Powers

Hostetter provided documentation showing that on numerous occasions the full market assessment was significantly lower than the home's actual selling price.

For instance, a home at 49 Sugar Brush Lane had a full market assessment value listed at \$26,667.

On Sept. 1, 2006, the home sold for nearly five times that much - \$132,000, according to records obtained on the St. Lawrence County website.

A log home at 1800 Rac-

quette River Road sold for \$247,000 on Oct. 8, 2004. Again, that selling price was nearly five times as high as the \$49,167 listed on the full market value assessment.

Hostetter said the problem is that a home that sells for the exact same price in the neighboring town of Pierrepoint would pay far greater school taxes than if it were in Colton. Residents in those two towns pay school taxes to Colton-Pierrepoint Central School.

County Real Property Director Jane B. Powers said this situation has existed for decades in the town of Colton and some other county towns, despite pressure from both her office and the state to correct the inequities.

Three other towns in the county have also resisted updating their assessment

rolls including the towns of Fowler, Parishville and Clare.

The county, she said, does not have the authority to force towns to conduct property revaluations. The state wants all property in a given county to use the same uniform percentage value.

Also, town boards who have elected assessors can request, but not force, their assessors to conduct a property revaluation to make sure that assessments keep up with current selling prices.

"This problem has been recognized by the county Legislature for many, many years," Powers said.

Colton, Parishville, Clare and Fowler have managed to under assess their residential properties by over assessing non-residential property, Pow-

See TAXES Page 2

Continued From Page 1

ers said.

That includes placing high assessment values on land owned by New York state, utility-owned lands such as hydro electric dams and property owned by mining companies like the zinc mines in Fowler.

"According to state measurement standards, the utilities are picking up a higher share of taxes than they should," Powers said.

Legal action has been taken in recent years by both the state and utility companies. In some cases they have been successful at convincing the courts to lower their property assessments.

Contributing to the problem is the fact that the market value of the county's residential property has generally grown faster than the market value of state-owned and utility-owned land, Powers said.

"This problem can only be cured if a town conducts a complete revaluation," Powers said.

The town of Colton has a great deal of state-owned land as well as hydro dams which pay a large percentage of the towns property taxes.

Powers said Colton, Parishville and Fowler have assessors who are elected rather than appointed by a town or village board.

Assessors in Colton, Parishville and Fowler have resisted raising assessment values for homeowners because they don't want to

anger the people who elect them to their jobs.

"The people who benefit the most are the ones who put the assessors in office. Those assessors don't even answer to their town board because they are elected," Powers said.

She acknowledged that the situation is problematic for elected assessors.

"It's an ethical dilemma. Doing the right thing may be political suicide," Powers said.

In Colton, each of the three assessors run for four-year terms. Daniel McNamara currently serves as chairman of the assessment department at an annual salary of \$15,832.

The other two assessors, George Wright, and Tina Miller are each paid \$3,039 a year, according to the town clerk.

McNamara refused to discuss the issue when reached at his office in the town hall, referring questions to Town Supervisor William R. Swafford.

"We just went through a terrible election in the town of Colton and I don't want to get into this assessment controversy," McNamara said.

Wright and Miller could not be reached for comment.

Swafford said he was aware some Colton homes were selling at higher prices than past years.

He said he has not received complaints from residents in the neighboring town of Pierrepont about assessment inequities between the two towns.

"This is the first I've heard of any outside grumblings," he said. "As far as the assessments go, the town board doesn't get involved."

Swafford referred questions to McNamara, saying that McNamara was the appropriate person to discuss the matter.

Overall, she said the county has made a great deal of progress over the past several years, with 28 of the 32 towns in the county completing property revaluations to make tax distribution more equitable.

The county is also seeking a \$50,000 state grant to research the idea of setting up a county-wide coordinated assessment program.

The goal would be to create uniform assessment values for all property in the county.

In the past, all 32 towns in the county had assessors who were elected by the public, rather than appointed by their respective town or village boards.

Now, only five towns have elected assessors including the towns of Colton, Parishville, Norfolk, Edwards and Fowler.

Even though they were elected by the public, assessors in Norfolk and Edwards agreed to conduct property revaluations in their towns to bring properties to a uniform value.

"They've made the jump. It's the right thing to do to have everyone at a uniform percentage value," Powers said.