

The County Assessor

The difficult task of placing an equitable valuation on all real property and taxable personal property is performed by the county assessor. Washington State is experiencing an erratic market. While some areas continue to grow, others show no growth or a decline in property values, making the assessor's job even more demanding.

The assessor's primary duty is determining the value of all real property and taxable personal property for the purpose of equitable distribution of tax liabilities to the taxpayers in the various districts.

The amount of taxes to be paid (the amount of levy required), is determined by the various taxing districts such as the State of Washington, county and city legislative authorities, fire districts, school districts and other "junior" districts, as well as the voting public in its consideration of special levies.

The value and levy required are used to calculate the amount due from each taxpayer according to their proportionate share of the total moneys necessary to provide the numerous governmental services.

Before 1983, state law required the assessor to reappraise real property as least every four years. Now, counties with adequate resources may expedite responses to market fluctuations by performing reappraisals on an annual basis with a physical inspection on a less frequent six-year basis. Any taxpayer who disagrees with the value determined by the assessor has the right to appeal the value to the county board of equalization.

BUILDING APPRAISALS

There are three approaches used to determine the valuation of a building or other improvements to property: the "cost approach," the "market approach," and the "income approach." To utilize each approach, complete data must be obtained on the property being appraised. Such information would include:

- Outside measurements
- Type of construction
- Age
- Condition
- Location/zoning
- Plumbing
- Heating
- Income and expenses of property
- Any other information which may influence the value

The income approach, or capitalization of net income, is most commonly used in valuation of commercial properties. In the market approach, properties which are comparable and have recently sold are used to establish value. The cost approach, which can be used to supplement the market approach, uses identifiable material and labor costs plus depreciation when appropriate.

LAND APPRAISALS

Land valuation is determined after a survey of the prices paid for similar land, thus establishing a "market value" as set by buyers and sellers of property. The "market" is not determined after viewing one or two isolated sales, but by thorough examination of an adequate number of transactions. In the appraisal of farm land, careful examination must be given to production records, soil characteristics and other elements that affect income from the land and tend to fix the market value. In older urban neighborhoods, the land residual method may be used.

PERSONAL PROPERTY

Personal property valuations are determined after reviewing returns submitted by taxpayers and the examination of the owner's accounting records. Equipment valuation schedules, depreciation tables and other guides have been jointly prepared by the Washington State Department of Revenue and county assessors in an effort to obtain greater uniformity.

EXEMPTIONS

January 1 is the date that property value is listed in Washington. State law exempts from property tax the following: intangible personal property (stocks, bonds and bank accounts); government-owned property; church property; veterans and relief property; certain music, art and dance halls; humane societies; certain day care centers; dialysis outpatient facilities; and household goods. In addition, tax exemptions may be available for destroyed property, historic property and home improvements. Senior or disabled persons, upon application, may obtain exemption from a portion of their property tax.

RECORDS AND ADMINISTRATION

In addition to the tens and even hundreds of thousands of appraisal records maintained on properties in some counties, the assessor is required to keep numerous other records. A detailed series of maps showing all properties within the county must be maintained, and a set of aerial survey photos is also a vital part of the mapping system in most counties. Each time a parcel of property is sold or divided, or a new plat filed, the transaction is shown in the assessor's records. The assessment roll of the county, maintained by the assessor, lists:

- Taxpayer
- Legal description
- Tax code area
- Location
- Assessed valuation for all property within the county

Appraisers within the assessor's office may specialize in a certain type of real and personal property appraisal. Some appraisers are therefore assigned to residential properties, some to commercial, and others to land, timber or personal property. Statewide appraisal schools and International Association of Assessing Officers' (IAAO) courses to train field personnel have been sponsored by the Washington State Association of County Assessors and the Department of Revenue as an aid in obtaining greater uniformity of valuation methods. Appraisers must be accredited by passing an examination required by state law. Fifteen hours of continuing education must also be completed every two years.

Information Provided By: Washington Association of County Officials