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NOTE: On October 9, 2008, The Post Star (Glens Falls) published an article entitled Consolidation Has Many Positives. I submitted the following response to the Editor, Ken Tingley.

A Response to: Consolidation has many positives

In 1970, Tompkins County residents did not vote to get rid of their local assessors but the electorate did choose that assessment functions be performed by the county. I believe many of the local assessors were approaching retirement age and at the time could not find replacements and, therefore, proposed the idea to allow the assessment function to be performed at the county level.

There are a number of particulars to think about (for example staffing, geography, population density, climate and the local electorate) before deciding whether or not the assessment function should remain local or given county consideration. The article mentions that Tompkins County has an assessment staff of 14, whereas Washington County has 10 assessors for its 17 towns, plus the staff at Real Property Tax Services. Again, 10 assessors for 17 towns clearly denote that consolidation in Washington County already exists; there are at least 4 assessors in multiple towns.

Washington County is approximately 835 square miles of land; approximately 70 percent more land than Tompkins County (492 square miles). Is it fair to interpret that Washington County requires 70 percent more in staff? Is it fair to interpret that Washington County should have more than a single assessment office? According to the 2000 census, Tompkins County has a population of 96,501 and its density is 203 people per square mile; whereas, Washington County had a population of 61,042 and a density of 73 people per square mile. Is it fair to interpret that Washington County requires 37 percent less staff than Tompkins County?

The fact is Tompkins County and Washington County are different. I believe it is fair to say that Tompkins County is denser than Washington County, which allows assessment personnel the ability to see more parcels in a given day than Washington County. The climate may be similar but Washington County is almost twice the area than Tompkins County and possesses more rural area. This makes delivering the assessment function considerably more difficult and more expensive (travel time, fuel cost) from a single office.

The concern that local residents have about giving up local control of the local property taxes is indeed a two-way street. Assessors know their local properties and they are professionals. Appointed Assessors are required to take continuing education courses and are required to take an Ethics course at the beginning of every term served.

There are many assessors who do not reside in the town in which they perform the assessment function and in some towns as a condition of employment the towns insist that they reside. Also, wouldn't the people that work for the County have friends to help and perhaps want to punish newcomers?

The article mentions that Tompkins County is only one of two counties in the state, with countywide assessments and Nassau County being the other. Why weren't facts presented about Nassau County? On an annual basis nearly fifteen percent (15%) of the residential parcels in Nassau County file to appeal their assessment and the annual percentage of commercial parcel appeals are significantly greater.

No one has ever proven that county assessing will reduce taxes. In fact states which perform county assessing are also discussing property tax cap proposals (see Las Vegas Review-Journal 10-07-2008 and Star Tribune Minneapolis-St. Paul 10-5-2008).

Another important objective is to let the local electorate decide how they would like their real property assessment function performed but let them decide knowing the truth!

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