

Six **Annual Reassessment Resource Requirements Workshops** were conducted with local assessors and county directors across the state. A **Review and Recommendations Workshop** was then conducted to bring together ORPS and representatives of the local assessment community to discuss the findings from the initial six workshops. The plan of work is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Project Plan

The six **Annual Reassessment Resource Requirements Workshops** were designed to identify the resources that would be required to implement the annual reassessment program. The municipalities that were invited to the local workshops were categorized according to when they had completed their last reassessment. Category 1 comprised any municipalities that had completed a reassessment in the past year or were planning to do a reassessment in 2000. Category 2 contained municipalities that conducted at least one reassessment in the past 10 years. Category 3 municipalities had not conducted a reassessment since before 1989 (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Localities by Category Type

The half-day workshops were held regionally to ensure a broad representation from New York's diverse assessment community, including economic as well as urban/rural differences. While the local assessment community was divided geographically and according to how recently they had done a reassessment, all six workshops produced similar results.

In each workshop, CTG delivered a brief presentation on the project goals and process. CTG then asked participants, through a facilitated exercise, to identify what they would need in order to implement the program. Each response was recorded on a piece of paper and placed on a common wall for viewing. Like responses were clustered together based on the participants' discussion. Participants were then asked, as a group, to label the clusters and then individually to identify the five most important clusters. Participants were highly engaged in the process—offering a variety of solutions for the challenges the program revealed.

In all, 162 individuals, representing local assessors, county directors, a few town supervisors, and a small group of private contractors attended. This group, representing 134 local governments, produced 472 separate responses, which were then grouped into 10-15 clusters for each session (see Table 1). The five general themes that emerged from the workshop clusters are presented below.

Annual Reassessment Resource Requirements Workshop Findings

A consistent set of themes emerged from the analysis of workshop results. Some regional variations were identified among the results; however, this variation existed among the lower priority concerns. Therefore, the findings presented here represent the issues that were consistently raised and given the highest priority by the participants across all workshops

As expected, participants provided commentary on additional topics related to annual reassessment, and did not focus exclusively on resources. This information was also considered important and is presented as part of the overall findings. Essentially, the workshop participants made it clear that in order to consider the resources needed to implement the annual reassessment program they would also need to consider a set of factors much broader than resources alone. A brief discussion of each of the themes that emerged from the workshops is presented below. Table 2 identifies each theme together with a brief description of that theme and the sub themes that emerged from the analysis.

Flexibility

The call for flexibility was present in all six sessions. Participants expressed frustration that they had been told there is only one way to qualify for maintenance aid, and they said they wanted the program to allow for more than one process. Participants said they wanted to know why and how the process was to be changed and why alternate methods were not considered. In some cases participants said the new process was a deterrent to successful implementation. The two consistent sub themes discussed below appeared in the workshops.

Where the current process works—leave it alone. The sub theme of “if it isn't broke, don't fix it” came across

quite strongly in each workshop. Those who were already doing periodic reassessments wanted to be allowed to continue with the work they were doing. They saw this program as a way to penalize good work by attaching more bureaucracy to an already burdensome system. Those that were doing reassessment on a two–four year cycle said their rolls were “okay” based on the conditions that exist in the community they support. Many said that this new program took away any incentive to participate in the maintenance aid program.

Let the users choose what works best for them. Those municipalities who were not currently doing annual reassessments said they wanted other options to obtain maintenance aid stating “one size does not fit all.” Participants offered various strategies for both technical solutions as well as process alternatives that ran the gamut from the most simplistic, cost-effective solutions to the more elaborate. One participant said that alternative software was better suited for smaller municipalities and asked not to be penalized for using “non-sanctioned” software. Others said there were alternative means to obtaining the same end by changing the way the tax rate is calculated. Some suggested forming a state assessment/data collection team that moves from town to town to relieve some of the work or the additional time required as a result of the new program. This was particularly important for those municipalities that had part time officials or minimal staff. Still others suggested allowing for local analysis of their data at the individual municipality level. In short, this was a topic that generated considerable discussion and spurred a number of suggestions.

Changes in ORPS’s business rules, processes, and educational practices

Participants identified a number of areas where ORPS could change its business rules and processes to aid the further development and implementation of the annual reassessment program. Standardizing rules, offering additional training programs, providing technical tools, and improving communication all fell under the changes called for by participants.

Define and standardize program rules, regulations, and guidelines. Participants said they were uncertain about the rules, regulations, and guidelines of the new program. They wanted to know what “problem” the program was supposed to “solve,” what their roles and responsibilities would be, and who was going to provide them with the information needed to conduct annual reassessments. Participants said they were frustrated that the rules, regulations and guidelines had not been defined prior to the program’s launch. They expressed concern that their issues would not be taken into consideration as the program was being developed.

April 2000 was the deadline ORPS was working with for a final implementation plan for the new program. In order to qualify for the increased maintenance aid in 2001, the first year of the program, guidelines needed to be in place and communicated to county directors and assessors as soon as possible. As a result, many parallel processes were in place. Participants were being asked to consider the resources they might need to participate in the new program without having a full understanding of the rules that would govern that program. ORPS was developing guidelines for participation while they were announcing and trying to raise interest in the program. Further, assessors and county directors were being asked to commit to applying for the new maintenance aid program, under incomplete or inconsistent information about the application process. They were therefore reticent to commit to a program that did not have clear guidelines.

Increase attention to training of assessors, directors, and ORPS’s central and regional staff. Participants consistently identified training as a key issue. They said additional training should be required for all participants involved in the assessment process in order to be prepared to implement continuous reassessments. An “educational seminar on the basics of annual reassessment” would help make sure that all parties share a similar understanding of the new program, participants said. Then, training classes on the technical aspects of the program, such as doing computer assisted mass analysis (CAMA) and other trending and valuation techniques should be provided to local assessors and county directors as an alternate means to achieve annual reassessments. Some suggested the need for more comprehensive field training in order to do reappraisals.

Participants said that training on Real Property Services (RPS) software, data collection, data entry and clerical duties would help a number of assessors, directors and their staffs to implement the new program.

Participants stated that ORPS’s staff at the regional and central levels should be better trained themselves before attempting to deploy the program. Many said they felt ORPS did not understand the day-to-day responsibilities of assessors and directors who have direct interaction with taxpayers and local officials, and suggested ORPS would gain a better understanding if “they walked in our shoes for a time.” Local workshop attendees also expressed concern that state appraisers need to be better trained and qualified to do advisories as in the case of complex property appraisals.

Provide more adequate technical tools and equipment. Participants called for user-friendly software to assist

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them in annually updating the rolls. Updated RPS software, statistical software, CAMA programs, and ratio analysis programs were listed by participants as tools that they would need to conduct annual reassessments. Participants also said technical resources were needed to blend fieldwork with identifiable databases. Any acquisition of new software should be guided by state requirements for maintenance aid.

Participants, in some cases, said their computer systems were so outdated that they could not adequately run the sophisticated programs available today. Many did not have Internet access or the capability to obtain it in their localities. Therefore the transition to annual reassessment supported by the use of computer-based or web-based statistical tools seemed impossible to these participants.

Improve channels of communication. Throughout each workshop there was a call for consistent communication of guidelines and rules. Local assessors and county directors said they were receiving information from a myriad of sources, including the assessors' association, the directors' association, ORPS's regional staff, ORPS's central staff and the ORPS's web site. Despite many presentations made by ORPS of at various association meetings and the mailing of various printed material, many participants did not have a full or clear understanding of the program and the options available to them in implementing the program or the benefits they might expect to gain.

Funding

The call for more funding and targeted disbursement of funding was clearly present in all six sessions. Participants identified four types of funding issues. First, they observed that in most jurisdictions the initial costs of a full revaluation far exceed the available funds or ability to secure local legislative funds for such an endeavor. Second, ongoing maintenance of rolls may cost some municipalities more than the \$5 per parcel state reimbursement. Third, the maintenance aid is placed in the general fund, rarely if ever reaching the assessor's office directly. Fourth, regardless of the disbursement of the aid, the participants said that the \$5 per parcel was insufficient to act as an incentive.

Initial revaluation costs are high for many municipalities. Participants said that the initial cost would be well above the \$5 per parcel offered in the maintenance aid program, particularly for municipalities who do not have up-to-date rolls. Participants also proposed that the state be responsible for conducting revaluations every six years, with assessors responsible for updates in the years in between.

Ongoing roll maintenance. Participants said even in those municipalities where the \$5 per parcel would cover the costs associated with continuous reassessments; they would still need to ask their municipality for money up front for the resources necessary to implement the program. In some cases participants stated their municipalities had just received the maintenance aid for the assessments performed two or more years ago. The acknowledged gap between the expenditure of the increased funds and the reimbursement through the maintenance aid program was likely to be greater than the municipalities could handle and therefore the assessors expected that they would not receive additional support.

Funnel maintenance aid to the assessor's office. Maintenance aid increases the amount of state funding to municipalities, but participants said that many of their offices "never see a dime" of that state aid. According to the participants, it is not unusual for maintenance aid to be used to fund expenses in other programs while assessors must "beg" their respective government bodies for basic operating expenditures. Therefore, the increased costs and effort to maintain continuous reassessment would not necessarily result in increased resources to do so.

The \$5 per parcel was not persuasive. According to participants, the original ORPS sponsored legislative proposal for a \$20 per parcel reimbursement for initial revaluation was "a much more attractive and realistic incentive than the current program." They called for more "persuasive" funding for conducting annual reassessments.

Legislative Change with Effective Enforcement

While neither ORPS nor the assessment community has direct control over the Real Property Tax Law, participants consistently called for both major and minor changes in the tax law to assist with their function, including a local mandate and synchronizing the state's different assessment calendars.

Mandate reassessment. Agreeing with the need for improved equity, participants consistently stated that a state mandate requiring municipalities to periodically reassess their tax rolls would be the only way to achieve equity. Agreeing on the specifics of this mandate is where the issue becomes clouded. Requiring a periodic

reassessment was referred to by most of the participants as a “cycle bill.” A cycle bill however, means different things to different people. Cycle legislation in one instance translated to a request for legislation to mandate reassessment, in other instances it was more specific, to mean mandating that a reassessment be done once within a six-year cycle with periodic updates in between. Others meant conducting the reassessment at a specific point within the cycle for each property without periodic updates. And in other instances it meant doing a reassessment within the cycle period for parts of the assessment roll.

Establish one statewide real property tax calendar. Participants cited that differences in tax calendars between neighboring municipalities or towns that share a school district “play havoc” with their assessment responsibilities. Participants offered as a solution a consistent statewide tax calendar that would require assessors to work on their rolls at the same time.

Outreach, Education, and Full Disclosure

New York’s property assessment system is complex. Participants called for a focus on educating the public and elected officials about the tax system as a way to help in the implementation of the annual reassessment program. Town boards and school boards rely on the work of the local assessor, yet many of them do not understand the equalization rate and how it affects the taxes that are levied in their jurisdiction. Likewise, according to participants, the public does not always understand the role and responsibility of the local assessor or county director. Helping to explain the system to town and school boards and to the general public, participants said, would enable them to conduct annual reassessments with less confusion and opposition.

Need a method of generating understanding of New York’s property tax system. Participants said that property owners “fear” reassessments because of the threat of increased taxes. Educating the public about the need to improve tax equity and the role of the local assessor and county director, through the media and to the public directly, would help them more successfully implement the program and promote better understanding of the real property tax system in general.

Participants stated the lack of understanding of the assessor’s role and responsibilities resulted in mistrust for their position. Continuous reassessments without strong public support and education from state and local officials could negatively impact public perception of the tax system and the assessment community.

Build support and cooperation of elected officials. Participants said that educating their locally elected officials (city, town and school boards) on both the general role of the assessor and the specifics of the new annual reassessment program is necessary for the program to be implemented successfully. One participant said, “my office is less respected than that of the local dog catcher.” They wanted help convincing officials of the importance of their office and profession, and in turn, the merits of this program, thus gaining key support throughout the reassessment process.