

IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

When did we stop talking to each other?

One of my pet peeves is people criticizing and making judgments about subjects they know little or nothing about and that has certainly been rampant on the subject of the Supervisor of Assessor's role in the minor delay this year of the of property tax assessment procedures. Unfortunately, Zephyr writer Mike Kroll has been in the forefront of this kind of biased and inaccurate reporting (and I use the term loosely).

Kroll's latest article quotes several officials saying, "there is absolutely no excuse" for delays in the Supervisor of Assessments office, the office of Joyce Skinner. The quote goes unanswered and Skinner tells me no one has bothered to talk directly to her in order to understand the process in her office and the extreme conditions under which they have had to prepare assessments for the past two years.

I can only assume they don't want to be confused by the facts.

The fact is that several years ago our former County Clerk, Sally Blodgett, God rest her soul, and former Treasurer Carolyn Griffith recommended that the new computer software for the assessment program be a Fidlar and Chambers company program and the county board approved. This was over the objections of Skinner, who recommended DevNet, the current provider who has expertise in property tax and assessment programming areas.

Frankly, Fidlar and Chambers had misrepresented themselves in the sale

to the county and didn't mention they had never tried the program before. As a result, enormous problems developed with the program, delays were caused and the county officials finally figured out they had made a mistake and changed to the DevNet company, the one Mrs. Skinner had recommended to deaf ears years before.

So last year, the biennial year when every property is supposed to be examined, the assessments were entered hurriedly, published late and the Board of Review didn't meet until July. When I was on the board in 1994-97, the board met at the end of October prior to the billing year. In 2004, bills were rushed out in early August and the property tax payments were due in September and October, when they are usually due June 1 and September 1.

The Board of review had 300 claims to review and decide. It was a tough year for all people and offices concerned. So the Assessor's office has been playing catch-up ever since. Now the work for 2004 tax assessments had to be completed in half the usual time, from July until publication of assessments in mid-January. Skinner and her office were quite pleased to have been able to accomplish that. The State deadline for publication is December 31, but with permission from the State Department of Revenue, they published two weeks late.

Mrs. Skinner sees no reason why the tax bills should be late this year. If anyone would bother to discuss the issue with her, which none of her detractors have

done, she would tell them that, typically, a number of mandates from the state have been handed to her office which require more work, such as exemptions having to be figured and prorated all year instead of once a year as before. She would tell them that there is hardly anyone left in the State Department of Revenue, which causes delays in the assignment of a multiplier to Knox County assessments, and work cannot be completed until that is received.

Paula Monzo, of the County Clerk's office, expects that after she receives her abstract from the county assessor's office, it will take 30 days for her work and for the multiplier to be received. Then Knox County Treasurer Robin Davis needs about two weeks to get out 33,000 or so tax bills.

No doubt everyone will be working as quickly as possible to get bills out some time in May so they can be due in June. Board of Review hearings are scheduled for March 16-18 and Skinner expects to get information to the County Clerk's office as quickly as possible during the process and finally by March 23.

In my opinion and others, the Supervisor of Assessments Office is understaffed and could be causing part of the delay, but no one can deny they have accomplished huge amounts of work in a short space of time in the last year.

However, Skinner is looking forward to the new, required qualifications of four elected assessors, beginning next year, who must be full time, receive increased training and certification and will be allowed to hire deputies and a field person. This will



considerably decrease the workload of Mrs. Skinner and her office staff.

The next project will be to find people who are willing to run for office of assessor, take the training, and do the fun job of assessing property for the purpose of taxation. No doubt people will be knocking each other over trying to get petitions.

But to put the whole delay at the feet of our Supervisor of Assessments is unfair and petty. It would be really grown-up of her critics to speak with her directly and do their homework.

Caroline Porter is a freelance writer, a member of the Board of Review and Knox County Board. Other columns are online at www.thezephyr.com.