

IN MY OPINION**Caroline Porter****Assessor puts questions to rest**

At a crowded Galesburg City Council meeting this week, City of Galesburg assessor Darrell Lovell deftly demonstrated and explained his office's website. Several citizens had complained that information and photos of their homes shown on the site invaded their privacy. Lovell explained that contrary to sites of assessors in Bloomington, Henry County, Moline and other Illinois communities, his local website doesn't show owner's names. In addition to a photo of the house, the property information reveals market price, equalized assessed evaluation, square footage and exemptions.

One person had complained that their children were in the property photo. Another said his license plate could be read. Lovell has retaken those photos. He described the thousands of hits on the site when it was launched, used by realtors, attorneys, other professionals and interested Internet users, no doubt. He told of people who want to contest the assessed valuation of their property and how they can now sit in their homes and look up comparable property information for presentation to the Knox County Board of Review, without having to pay hundreds of dollars for an appraisal.

Lovell talked about computer-wise senior citizens and people who are disabled being able to download exemption forms, fill them out, sign them and send them to his office

without having to struggle downtown. He must have done a good job of justifying his website. There were no questions from either the council or the audience. Of course, those records are public and out of over 10,000 properties listed, less than five property owners complained.

Lovell, has been elected since 1985 as Township Assessor for the Town of the City of Galesburg (a township contiguous to the boundaries of Galesburg.) Last year, out of the 13,000 parcels of property his office assessed, only 13 complaints were received. This year, however, is the quadrennial year when every property must be reviewed and reassessed. Because of computer programming problems, the process is delayed, but ongoing.

"It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood."

Another local hot button issue is the activities of the group known as Neighborhood Watch. There are stories of volunteers, whom I do not know, cruising around Galesburg looking for properties they claim are not up to snuff when it comes to local ordinances against junk and old cars in yards, high grass and weeds, etc. After taking photos of the properties, they proceed to report the hapless property

owners to city officials.

My impression of the term "neighborhood watch," is that we should be watching our own neighborhoods. And not just for violations. Maybe we should be watching for neighbors who are sick, who can't mow their own lawns, rake their own leaves, who have problems that only neighbors know and care about. We would be naïve if we didn't understand that some things are tolerated in some neighborhoods that wouldn't be tolerated in others. We live in a city, which means we live close together and there have been rules on the books for years about limitations of what property owners can and cannot do. On the other hand, maybe government gets involved in our neighborhood problems because we are always calling the cops on each other, instead of talking face to face. It's a modern thing and it's not good.

In one home I've owned in my 30 years here, we had a nice picture window in the rear which framed our back yard and those of several neighbors. One neighbor was a sick, cranky old man who was difficult to communicate with. At one point, he lugged a toilet to the back of his property, which became nicely framed by our picture window. In talking to another neighbor who had a good relationship with this man, we asked if he would diplomatically suggest he get rid of the toilet. After several

weeks, it disappeared. But, not to worry, I have a picture of that toilet viewed through our picture window.

Many years ago I began to be awakened every night by a neighbor's howling dogs. After several weeks I identified the neighbor a block away. I called him, gave him my name and told him where I lived. I told him his dogs were making an awful racket and asked him if there was anything he could do. He explained that his dog had a litter of puppies and they had tried to keep them inside at night. He was a very nice man. And then he thanked me for not calling the police. I told him I didn't believe in dealing with neighbors that way.

So when someone complains about the tall grass of Mr. Ed DeWitt, whom I don't know, and he explains that he is unable to mow his lawn and can't afford to hire someone to do it, our response should be, "Can I mow your lawn for you?"

Neighborhood Watch — I'm all for watching out for our neighbors and inviting them to watch out for us. But it's a neighborhood thing. And it should stay that way.

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