

Laszewski has to be workhorse for shared assessing system in Ridgeway, Shelby and Yates

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RIDGEWAY — Over the past 15 years, the comparable property sales Ridgeway Assessor Trisha Laszewski used to determine assessments nearly always came from within the town.

With 3,100 parcels, the most in Orleans County, Laszewski only had to reach out for unique properties. Think log cabins.

Her coverage area is even larger this year, with the added work from Shelby and Yates contracting with Ridgeway for assessment services.

Sharing assessors is common across Orleans County, with all but Murray and Clarendon having single-town assessors. But with some 7,200 parcels and the deadline for Enhanced STAR and other common exemptions nearing, Ridgeway's office is the busiest.

"The volume has been overwhelming. There are days where people keep coming through the door," Laszewski said Monday. "I've been here at night and on weekends, trying to get into a flow."

Within an hour of opening Monday, Laszewski and Carianne Glass, a newly-hired assessor assistant, were being greeted by a round of residents hoping to knock out their tax returns and assessment exemptions in a single morning. Glass chatted with an older man who was trying to scout out the available tax preparers in town as Laszewski ran his pension records through a copier so as to have validation for an income-based exemption.

A woman, proud to be 81 years old, came in a minute later. She had went to bed worried that she had lost the necessary records and was overjoyed when Laszewski said they had all they needed for the exemption.

"Thank you God!," the woman exclaimed, "and thank you so much."

At least half of Ridgeway's parcels have at least one exemption, from the common STAR and Enhanced STAR school tax exemptions to those for agricultural parcels, not-for-profits and clergy. All have to be renewed by March 1 for the 2016-17 tax year.

Handling them all has been aided by Candy Koch, on loan from the shared codes enforcement office, who mans the Ridgeway office on Fridays so Laszewski can be in Yates. She dropped off a handful of documents Monday morning.

“It’s really busy, but it will settle down. ... We’re taking baby steps,” Laszewski said.

The shared service is hardly the first in western Orleans County, whose towns and villages have used a five-municipality comprehensive plan since the early 2000s and in recent years Ridgeway, Shelby and Yates created a cross-jurisdictional court system that allows judges to back one another up on short notice.

Shelby and Yates have been partners in assessments for 20 years. They formed the the state’s first consolidated assessing program, which effectively made them a single unit for assessments.

Shelly Harling, who was the towns’ assessor for 11 years, was elected last fall as town clerk of Yates. Even though the Shelby-Yates CAP had to contend with industrial properties in Shelby’s half of Medina, lakefront homes in Yates and thousands of other properties, she said it worked out well.

“It certainly kept the costs down,” Harling said, noting the assessing cost per parcel figures compiled by the county. “Ours was one of the lowest.”

Joining Ridgeway led to breaking the CAP, which would allow the three towns to be reassessed on a non-unified schedule.

Harling believes putting the three towns together was the right move. In Medina, the dividing line between the towns gave some properties two assessments and put one side of a street on her side and those on the other on Laszewski’s side.

“It makes sense, especially merging Ridgeway and Shelby merge,” Harling said. “We’d always be back and forth on split buildings. With Bernzomatic, she had the building, I had the parking lot. It makes sense that Ridgeway, Shelby and Medina are done by one person, there’s more uniformity and consistency.”

Laszewski said the idea of taking on both towns came in the late spring, when Harling was gearing up for the election. It made sense for their budgets and creates a system where the next generation of assessors can be trained and ready to take over.

She’s glad to have Harling available as she tries to merge record-keeping and styles between the three towns. The area behind her desk is now cramped with a second massive filing cabinet of Shelby’s property records, with folders of exemptions and local laws at a reach.

“Trisha is awesome, and I’ll help her, not with assessments but driving around. She’s eager to learn all the neighborhoods,” Harling said. “She’s very busy but absolutely capable.”

Laszewski's path into the position was indirect. She was working as a clerical substitute and teacher's aide when a posting for civil service tests caught her eye.

"I took the clerks test, and then the assessor clerk job came up," Laszewski said. "Not knowing, I thought it would be nice, close to home, a quiet office."

Fifteen years later, that isn't the case. Laszewski said assessing isn't a black and white field — it's gray field. People surge in randomly; it's the only job with a specific day for grievances.

"It becomes more comfortable, but it's never easy."

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