

# County assessment is proposed

## Secretary Ervin in Wausau

Wisconsin Department of Revenue Secretary Roger Ervin on Monday in Wausau proposed a major change to property assessment, but the plan received a mixed, if not poor reception from local municipal officials, including assessors.



Roger Ervin

Currently, Wisconsin cities, villages and towns are charged to assess property for real estate tax purposes. If citizens object to the values placed on their properties, they can plead their case at an annual Board of Review made up of locally elected officials.

Under Ervin's plan, either counties or a consortium of local governments within a single county would take over assessment responsibilities. A county-level, seven-member Board of Review would handle all citizen challenges to what

properties are worth.

For Ervin, assessment reform is needed because the current system is cumbersome, inefficient and unfair. "We are not proposing change for change's sake," he said. "It is about change that is needed. We want a more standardized, reliable system."

Ervin said Wisconsin's 1,851 municipalities do not do a good job assessing properties and a full quarter of municipalities fail to meet a state requirement to keep assessments within 10 percent of municipal valuations set by the Department of Revenue.

The secretary said his department has over the past several years dramatically increased the efficiency of how state income tax forms are processed. With 500 less employees, he said, the Department of Revenue has shortened the average time to process tax refunds from eight weeks to three days.

He said Wisconsin property tax assessment and collection should be likewise improved. "The outlier is property tax, which has not changed for

years and years and years," he said.

Ervin argued that Wisconsin was alone in the nation for using a property tax assessment system involving so many municipalities. County-wide property assessment is the national norm, he said.

Ervin said county assessment would open the door to county equalization. Currently, the Department of Revenue monitors sales, establishes values for each municipality, and these values are used to compute municipal tax shares for K-12 public schools, technical schools and county government.

Ervin said county equalization would be based on actual assessments, not on DOR estimates. The secretary said county assessment would require the hiring of a county assessment administrator who would then hire needed assessors and office staff. Costs for county assessment would not count towards county levy limits, he said.

Currently, assessors annually modify assessments based on market trends and, periodically, perform a "from scratch" re-evaluation that includes an on site inspection. The Depart-

ment of Revenue plan would mandate that 20 percent of all properties would get an on-site inspection every year. All properties would thus get an inspection each five years.

Ervin said counties would be required to submit all assessment information to the Department of Revenue where it would be reviewed through its Integrated Property Assessment System.

The secretary said that if counties come up with unsatisfactory equalization reports then the Department of Revenue could order changes with costs for its trouble charged back to counties.

Local officials at the meeting largely reacted negatively to the plan.

"While some officials, including assessors, conceded problems with the current system, they said they didn't see major advantages to county-level assessment.

Several town officials bemoaned what they saw as another plan to take control away from local government.

One town official likened the DNR to the British Crown abusing the Colonies of New England before the American Revolution. Secretary Ervin was not amused, arguing that the De-

partment of Revenue was willing to walk from any assessment plan not supported by local officials. "We are not King George III," he said. "I'm not here to ram anything down your throat."

One assessor did not see how the proposed system would be more efficient. Equalization would be set by 72 county offices instead of five regional Department of Revenue offices, this person argued.

A municipal official disagreed that equalization would improve if it gets switched to the county level. There used to be county equalization years ago, he argued, but political shenanigans forced the state to take over this responsibility.

An assessor agreed that some towns failed to keep assessments current but that this was because re-evaluations were so costly. These town boards valued low taxes over fair taxes, he said. The assessor said the department's plan might provide better, more current on site inspection and assessment, but it would take substantially more money to fund a reformed system.

"This whole machine doesn't run on love," he said.