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Office passes review

Assessor meets all requirements

BY BEN CONLEY
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For the first time in a decade, the Monongalia County Assessor's Office received passing marks in every aspect of the state's evaluation process.

Assessor Mark Musick explained that the state employs monitors who look into all phases of the office's operation to ensure values are being kept current and all residents are being treated equally.

Musick was elected to the position in November 2012. Musick replaced Rodney Pyles in the assessor's office, ending a tenure that dated back to the 1980s. Pyles did not run for re-election in 2012 under considerable scrutiny over the lack of consistent property valuation in the county.

Before leaving office, Pyles brought in consulting firm Tyler Technologies, which instituted mass appraisals in an attempt to

rapidly make up for years of missed valuations. The jump in property values resulted in a backlash from taxpayers and thousands of appeals taken before the county commission, sitting as the board of equalization and review.

Musick cut the county's ties with Tyler Technologies on Dec. 31, 2013, saving \$620,000 of a three-year, \$1.7 million deal with the company implemented by Pyles in 2012. That followed a \$1 million contract that was signed with the firm in 2010.

"The focus when I came in was to get in compliance with everything. We knew what it was going to take to get there," Musick said.

"People ask what all this means, it means we've done what we're supposed to do. That's why we passed."

The evaluation, or monitoring, looks at mapping, data collection, implementation of a three-year plan, appraisal uniformity, sales validation and appraisal procedures.

Getting back in the state's good graces has been a step-by-step process. In October, the office learned that it had satisfied the mapping requirements for the first time since 2002.

In March, another hurdle was cleared when the office's evaluations were found to be within the acceptable range — 90 to 110 percent of a property's sale price. Musick said that number was at 71 percent

when he took office.

He credits the quick turnaround to the hard work of his employees, including appraisers Chris Michael and Kris Liller, who, prior to her employment with Monongalia County, spent the previous four years as the county's state monitor for the West Virginia Tax Office.

"That staff, we've only been together for a year. The 2014 year was our first cycle as a group. This is only our second cycle as a cohesive group working together," Musick said.

Liller was one of the employees hired with the money saved when the Tyler Technologies contract was terminated. She spent a total of 11 years as a state monitor prior to joining the assessor's office.

She said that seeing the chronic issues the county was having year after year makes the clean bill of health all the more satisfying.

"It is gratifying for the entire office. Not just the appraisal unit, but everyone in the main office, too. I think Mark and [Deputy Assessor] Chuck [Penn] came in with certain expectations and everyone got on board with it," Liller said.

Liller went on to explain that it became frustrating to see the lack of progress in Monongalia County when she was on the other side of the evaluation.

"It was very obvious and it was a little frustrating to see the reports. You know there's a problem, but it seemed like a slow process getting them to hire Tyler

Technologies, which wasn't perfect either. But it was a start," Liller said. "Now we're trying to fine tune what Tyler did."

The assessor's office has also dramatically increased its efforts to get into the communities through a series of 18 satellite sessions — the last of which wraps up this week.

"That's what we want to show people, that we've made a lot of changes internally on how we handle things, our procedures and the policies that we implement," Musick said. "It was a big task getting here, but that doesn't mean everything is over. People may think now you're compliant, so that's the end. No, you've got to keep on doing what you're doing."