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Assessor Munks can't ignore his office's problems

Two recent reports on the Skagit County Assessor's Office not only pinpoint problems but point the way to a more efficient and responsive organization.

Assessor Don Munks would do well to heed the recommendations in both documents rather than grasping for excuses, as has been his tendency.

The biggest immediate problem was the Assessor's inability to complete required on-site inspections for revaluations and, most notably, missing as much as \$90 million in new construction in the 2010 appraisal cycle.

That failure cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to state and local government and created an unfair distribution of the tax burden for Skagit County property owners.

Munks' dismissal of a report by Daphne Schneider and Associates as the error-prone product of someone without experience in assessment work is off the mark.

Schneider has 30 years' experience in business organization and human resources consulting. She holds a master's degree in organization development and has been an adjunct instructor at both Seattle Pacific University and the University of Washington.

During her investigation of conditions in the Assessor's Office Schneider interviewed every member of the staff. Her findings were disturbing.

While she gives some credit to Munks for improving communication with staff, she notes the lack of commonly understood goals. Also missing, according to the report, is a strategic plan for carrying out the responsibilities of the office, except for that which the chief deputy assessor says he keeps in his head.

Schneider was told by more than one staff member that supervisors tolerate employees reading or pursuing other non-work related activities when they run out of tasks.

Munks has tried to minimize that criticism by claiming that just one employee reads during breaks and lunch in order to be available to answer the phone.

Even if that is the case, it represents just one small part of the larger problem with the office.

Schneider's report took note of the office's somewhat fuzzy lines of authority with some staff members. Some were unclear on who is their direct supervisor and others believed that they have no supervisor other than Munks himself. The result is a lack of accountability.

The second report, issued last week by the state Department of Revenue echoed to some degree the issues highlighted by Schneider but delved more deeply into technical and structural issues.

While recognizing that the Assessor's Office has made some headway in addressing the shortfall in appraising new construction it is still likely to miss up to \$40 million in values this year.

Among other things the agency suggested more computer software training, documenting standard procedures, eliminating furlough days or at least reconsider their timing and reviewing the practice of assigning appraisers to non-appraisal work.

Munks has continued to complain that the staff cutbacks forced on him by the county commissioners was the main reason for the missed appraisals.

That may be, but his complaint might have greater credibility when he can show that the office is as productive as possible with its current resources.

Munks isn't in office to be a hero to his staff. His obligation is to taxpayers as a whole. His easy-going personality is useful, but not the crowning virtue of the job he was elected to perform.

He must set in place the structure needed to assure that assessments are current and that lapses in his office do not unfairly burden all taxpayers.

There is no greater priority than that. The need for change is urgent. Munks should respond as to a fire alarm.

He should not approach Monday morning as just another day.

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