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Firm hired to assist with revaluation

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The Wilkes County commissioners unanimously approved a contract with an Elizabeth City-based company for assistance with the county's first property revaluation since during their June 20 meeting.

The contract calls for county government to pay Vincent Valuations LLC up to \$500,000 for assisting as needed with the revaluation, to result in new property tax values being in place on Jan. 1, 2025, and first used with the 2025 tax bills.

The contract period began June 20 and continues through Dec. 31, 2015, unless terminated by either party with proper notice.

Wilkes Tax Administrator Will Lankford presented the contract and said he wanted Vincent available through the end of the year to help respond to appeals of new values if needed.

He said Vincent is the largest company of its type in the state and has been involved with revaluations in 47 counties, in some counties (including Watauga) doing the entire revaluation rather than assisting. Lankford said the Watauga tax office dropped its appraisal staff and has Vincent handling reappraisals fulltime.

Lankford said in an interview later that after peaking in 2022, he expected real estate prices to drop more than they have in Wilkes during the recent period of higher interest rates. He said there has been more of a decrease in sales volume than prices, with a lack of homes on the market in Wilkes partly why prices are still up.

Vincent staff will assist with analysis of Wilkes property values to help keep the revaluation progressing on schedule, said Lankford, tax administrator since July 1, 2021, and a Wilkes tax office employee since 2008.

“My biggest issue right now is that my staff is young and inexperienced,” he said. “I only have one besides myself who has been through a revaluation. They (Vincent staff) are here to help us with experience and analysis.”

Commissioner Stoney Greene asked if county tax office staff will work independently from Vincent staff or alongside them.

Lankford said teams of tax office staff likely will work apart from teams of Vincent staff. He added that Vincent staff will be mostly involved with commercial properties, while county tax office staff will focus largely on field work for residential revaluations.

Greene added, “I know the citizens of this county would like to know that they’re getting a fair shake” when their property is appraised.

Lankford said that under law, values for property taxes must be based on recent sales prices (of comparable property) within the county.

“They can’t look outside the county for their values for our analysis.... I will oversee the project and they will be working for us as opposed to us working with them.”

Lankford said Vincent staff will help compile data and make sure the numbers are accurate based on qualified sales, but final approval of everything will be left to the Wilkes tax office.

Vincent staff receive the same training as appraisers in the county tax department, he said, adding that they include people who developed revaluation software used by the Wilkes tax office.

Under state law, property revaluations must be conducted in each county at least every eight years.

A revaluation typically results in most property owners seeing higher property tax values. Commissioners often lower the property tax rate to achieve “revenue neutral,” thus easing the tax burden on property owners.

In 2001, the Wilkes County commissioners adopted a resolution calling for revaluations every four years to help limit impact with new values. Most counties about the size of Wilkes have revaluations every four years and some large counties do them even more often.

New Wilkes property tax values took effect as a result of new valuations in 2003, 2007, 2013 and 2019, so the county has gone four, six and six years before updating values since 2003.

After new property tax values became official on Jan. 1, 2013, lack of growth in values and lack of sales during the recession prompted county officials to delay starting a new revaluation to 2017 and new property tax values to Jan. 1, 2019. Property sales are needed to determine changes in value.

The combined new property value on Jan. 1, 2013, was \$5.49 billion.

The next revaluation resulted in a new combined value of \$5.90 billion on Jan. 1, 2019, only 3.9% more than on Jan. 1, 2013.

Less than a 5% increase in value is a major change from double-digit increases once typical with Wilkes revaluations. A double-digit increase is expected with the next revaluation.

The last revaluation resulted in the identification of about 50,300 property parcels. Lankford said there currently are nearly 50,700 parcels, with a combined value of \$6.1 billion.

This current value and values on Jan. 1, 2013, and Jan. 1, 2019, include parcels that are exempt from taxes and the entire value of other parcels with much of their value untaxed due to being used for agricultural purposes.

Changes in value from one year to the next result largely from tax office staff learning about new construction or other improvements, primarily through building permits.

Records at the Wilkes Register of Deeds Office and other sources that show property sales and sales prices are a key factor (but not the only factor) used to determine changes in values in different areas of Wilkes during revaluations, but not from year to year.

New values from a revaluation were originally scheduled for Jan. 1, 2023, but this was delayed to Jan. 1, 2025, at Lankford's request in June 2022.

Lankford said he requested this because COVID-19-related issues delayed arrival of new aerial photos of Wilkes needed to update property values. A comparison of the new and 2018 aerial photos and tax office sketches of properties in a computer program will help detect improvements not being taxed.

Lankford also said that starting as tax administrator on July 1, 2021, left him hard-pressed to have a proposed schedule of values ready for commissioners to consider approving in time for having new values in place on Jan. 1, 2019. He said two years are normally allowed for this.