

# **Killing the Messenger**

**By Carol C. Byrne**

There appears to be no end to bad ideas, no matter how well intentioned. One such bad idea is a three-year pilot program in Gloucester County that would eliminate municipal tax assessors in favor of a county-based assessor's office.

The explanation for the move is that it will help control property taxes, implying that high property taxes are the responsibility of assessors. That implication and the suggestion that assessors be eliminated as a solution sounds a lot like killing the messenger.

As the assessor in Tenafly, in Bergen County, a position I have held for 23 years in the town in which I have lived for 34 years, I am proud of the relationships I have with my fellow taxpayers and of the services my office provides. I am also president of the Association of Municipal Assessors of New Jersey, representing the assessors of this state, including those of Gloucester, whose concerns I share.

The Gloucester experiment and another more misguided piece of legislation that would eliminate both municipal assessors and municipal tax collectors are in many ways signs of the times. In the current economic environment, anything that promises to save money and shrink government is bound to prove popular.

Gloucester, in particular, was positioned as a model of shared services, a concept that had proved elusive in a state with such a strong tradition of home rule. It promised tax savings and improved efficiency and the state was picking up the \$8 million tab for the study.

The second piece of legislation, Senate bill S-458, calls for a county-by-county statewide binding referendum to eliminate both municipal tax assessment and tax collection and consolidate those services in county-based offices. It also makes the seductive promise of tax savings and greater efficiency. What's not to like?

Well, for example, rather than providing relief to municipalities both concepts will inevitably increase the burden on them to make ends meet. Instead of saving money they will likely increase the cost of government. And they surely will result in a loss of vital services of the citizens of affected municipalities. In short, both concepts have the potential to inflict more harm than to do good for the people they purport to help – the taxpayers.

Gloucester offers no evidence that transferring the assessing function to a county authority will save money on a sustained basis. (The \$8 million in state funding for the pilot program will evaporate after three years and no such funding will be available to other counties if the program is expanded statewide.) Rather, the reality is that many municipalities will incur greater costs as items such as the defense of tax appeals will be shared on a pro rata basis by all municipalities.

Senate bill-S458 will deal a financial blow whose impact will be felt for years to come. It will remove from municipal control the power to assess property owners on the basis of their real estate holdings and to collect, manage and disperse the tax dollars collected. It will deprive municipalities of the interest income on revenue collected and will require an enormous leap of faith for local governments to rely on third parties to assure they receive a fair and equitable share. Finally, municipalities will have no option if a majority of county voters chose to consolidate, effectively depriving local governments of powers granted under current state statutes.

A major issue with county-centered assessment collection statewide is the notion that one size fits all; which is far from the case when it comes to New Jersey and the demographic and economic diversity that is our state's great charm.

Assessment and collection are the economic engines that power municipal and county governments, as well as the school systems. We are not the only revenue center in local government but we are certainly the greatest source of funding for the services municipalities provide their taxpayers. I find it very surprising that the municipalities of Gloucester County surrendered that revenue generating power so willingly. I believe that they will come to regret the decision and that other elected officials will think long and hard before treading that slippery slope.

Equally important is the potential loss of equity that most municipalities have developed with their constituents. Absentee collection and assessment will mean less face-to-face relationships with taxpayers and voters. That doesn't help anyone, least of all the taxpayer.

**Carol C. Byrne** is the assessor of Tenafly, NJ, a post she has held for 23 years, and is also president of the Association of Municipal Assessors of New Jersey.