



# County of Hamilton

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## Unfinished Business

While it was obvious only a handful of people paid any attention to unfounded charges from various sources against our office during the past year and even fewer believed them, it is important to set the record straight.

One criticism was against our supposed “antiquated technology”. Interestingly, this came about the same time we introduced our new Android and iPhone mobile application. This update made our property records readily accessible on mobile devices and has been welcomed by users.

Over 12,000 users a day access our website, [hamiltoncountyauditor.org](http://hamiltoncountyauditor.org), which is continuously being updated and has long been recognized as one of the first and best such sites in the nation. Additionally, the fact that other county agencies, including the County Commissioners, repeatedly ask us for IT help and assistance makes the point that our technology is actually first rate.

Another charge was that our real estate transfer desk was making “illegal transfers”. The reality is that we have absolutely no investigative and enforcement authority over transfers under Ohio law. Guidelines from the County Prosecutor (our lawyer by state statute) specify what we must do when a legally prepared property transfer is presented.

Strangely enough, the one individual who made that criticism in several venues is an attorney. As an officer of the court, if he had knowledge of an illegal act, by our office or any other, he is required to present that information to the County Prosecutor. Although he was encouraged to do so, to date there is no indication he ever did.

Finally, there were recurring criticisms of our appraisal work. This important duty has always lent itself to cheap shots by opposing politicians and self-appointed community activists.

They ignore the fact that appraising property is an inexact science at best and our mass appraisals differ significantly from fee appraisals. Our mass appraisal costs about \$20 a parcel. A full fee appraisal can run up to \$400 to \$500 per parcel. With 350,000 parcels in Hamilton County it is obvious a mass appraisal is our only option.

Most often misunderstood is the fact that our appraisals are already a year old when they are applied. The current reappraisal numbers which just went into effect with the January, 2015 tax bill are "as of" January 1, 2014 as mandated by state law.

For example, the easiest way to criticize our work is to find a property which we valued at say \$2.3 million as of January 1, 2014 which is now being offered for sale by the owner for \$3 million or more; or perhaps find a property we valued at \$55,000 as of January 1, 2014 which just sold for \$95,000 in December.

We don't have a crystal ball and even if we did we are not allowed to guess at future values in the appraisal process. Real estate professionals know the high end market can appreciate quickly when it turns around. So do we. But we have to base our appraisal on the information we have and not what we think might happen in the market place.

As for that property we valued at \$55,000, after we set the value based on the information we had then, the owner did extensive work updating the interior which allowed the property to be offered at and eventually sold at a higher price.

Other misunderstandings come from a failure to understand the difference between the actual date and the "tax year". Did you know your 2015 property tax bills are for Tax Year 2014? This is confusing but that is the way state law sets it up. This makes it seem as if a newly-built property is severely undervalued but the value was set as of January 1, 2014 when it was less than 25% completed and had no certificate of occupancy.

The agricultural designation is also a source of concern to casual observers. Rest assured that we review and inspect every one annually to be sure they comply with state law which sets the requirements for this property tax reduction.

Protection against unfairness in setting property values comes from three major offices. First off, the State Tax Commissioner must review and approve our reappraisal values before they become valid. Secondly, the State Auditor is charged with annually auditing our books. And finally, the County Prosecutor has the ability to bring an action against us for any failure to follow state law.

In addition the Board of Revision made up of the President of County Commission, the Treasurer and the Auditor can make corrections after hearing evidence presented by property owners.

As a further protection and to maintain transparency we put all our public property records on our website making them available to every citizen. We accept the possibility that some may access these and criticize us without the benefit of complete information. That comes with the territory.

The important thing is that our work is not conducted behind closed doors and we stand behind it. Your questions, comments and suggestions are always welcome.

Dusty Rhodes  
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