

Act 68 of 2023

01/31/2025

Opinions from Lisa Wright

Primary questions surround cost, qualifications of staff, and due diligence of work completed concerning the Act 68 of 2023 study and recommendations. Below I have elaborated on the meaning of these three categories.

Cost – The cost of making these transitions to assessment districts, contract assessors, more frequent reappraisals have not been properly considered, and have been grossly under-estimated when questioned. All of the transitions in the study will be more costly than our current system. For example, I have heard testimony that converting to a different CAMA system is not a big deal if done during a town-wide reappraisal. I have been through this a few times in different towns and I can tell you it is a very big deal, and adds to cost both for the reappraisal contractor and for the local assessor or Listers to review data and ensure that it “translated” if you will from one program to the other (it usually does not very thoroughly or accurately). When towns go from elected Listers to Contract Assessors, this is also significantly more costly (see below). Sometimes towns “get what they pay for” in appointing a professional, sometimes they do not.

Qualification of Professionals – If we are going to an Assessor versus Board of Listers model, we need a Certified Tax Assessor program in Vermont, and one which is required in order to serve in this position. Currently all training is voluntary, and there is an assumption that an “Assessor” by label only is more qualified than a “Lister” by label only. Without required qualifications for Assessors, towns/taxpayers will pay 2, 3, 4 times the hourly rate for a contract assessor without any promise of having more highly qualified valuation professionals.

Due diligence of work completed – Another factor that is being grossly under-estimated is the time and staffing required to complete valuation work, and even the record keeping part of our work (the data needed to analyze and value properties accurately and equitably). Add to that a lot of bureaucratic work in managing homesteads, current use, and other exemption programs and there are a lot of time consuming details. Moving to larger assessment districts will not lessen the amount of time required to do this work properly, but I fear that the quality of that due diligence will get “watered down” if you will with larger districts.

I have testified before about the concept of “geographic competency” which has been a key concept for appraiser/assessor ethics (read USPAP as referred to in IAAO’s study) training for years. Will this local knowledge and due diligence in light of geographic competency be sacrificed by a larger bureaucracy? I believe it will based on prior experience with appraisal contractors and appointed assessors whose work I have followed. When those contractors do not take the time to develop that geographic competence, the quality of the work suffers.