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Technology changing assessments

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Gary Griffin can't imagine a lot of children clamoring to become assessors.

The work can be stressful. And, let's face it, assessors aren't always the most popular county employee. One of the keys to being able to do the job is a thick skin, Griffin said.

Griffin, who grew up in Todd County, joined the Crow Wing County assessor's office in November. He's the office supervisor in the county's land services division.

Griffin, 34, who is married with two children, lives on a hobby farm near Long Prairie with a few head of cattle. He started his career working toward a more traditional job — as a nurse. But he found his calling was elsewhere and after working for a lumber company in Wadena, he found a home in the printing business. Griffin worked as a production coordinator, working on advertisements with customers to ensure quality control before it went to the printing press. When technology changes meant job cuts in the business, Griffin saw an end to that seven-year career. But it opened the door to a new opportunity — one with Todd County in the assessor's office.

When Griffin was learning the ropes in Todd County, he wasn't convinced it would be the place for him. But he found he enjoyed the work and he began climbing the ladder to gain additional license levels. He liked the work and wanted to learn more.

Seated in his third-floor office in the historic courthouse in Brainerd, Griffin said attributes needed in an assessor — besides the thick skin in what can be a tough environment — include honesty and an ability to communicate well. As supervisor for the department, Griffin stepped in as longtime assessor Marty Schmidt retired.

The communication comes in for what can be a tricky subject — property valuations and



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Gary Griffin, Crow Wing County land services supervisor in the assessor's office, said technology is changing how assessors work and interact with the public. The goal is to provide greater customer service.

the relationship between the assessor's estimate and how that plays into taxes. The assessors look at comparable sales to reach estimates.

Assessors estimate what property would be worth if it were sold in the open market to determine value. How a property is used, whether for a residence or business, comes into play as a parcel's tax capacity is determined. Then the budgets and spending of taxing

authorities — cities, counties, townships, school districts and others — determine tax burdens. The state requires the assessed value to be within a range of 90 percent to 105 percent of the present day market. Assessors are required to physically look at every parcel in the county every five years.

With every county department being asked

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ASSESSOR / Computer upgrade will help

to do more with less, Griffin expects changes in technology in the assessor's office to make a difference.

The county has been working to convert its records from books and paper to a computer-aided mass appraisal system. The move should provide many options for reports and greater analysis of data, Griffin said. The conversion process has moved through all the residential property and land except for the city of Brainerd and is still working on commercial and industrial properties.

Griffin said the computer upgrade is going to provide greatly enhanced uniformity in Crow Wing County with the ultimate goal of treating people the same across the county. Assessors will have a handheld device to use in the field where they can take notes and have immediate access to historic records, including color photos to see if there has been a change to the property.

Assessors also will be leaving a card so the property owner will know when they stopped. Typically most assessments involve a look at the exterior with a smaller percentage where assessors go inside the structure. Residents don't have to let assessors inside. There is an old story that a property owner could fool the assessor by having a ramshackle exterior with a plush home inside. But Griffin said that isn't the average case and history has shown a good cue may be taken about the interior by how well the property is maintained on the outside.

Assessors take photos and measurements and look to be sure data is accurate, such as whether a patio or storage shed was noted in the past or is an addition. The idea is to determine what the property would sell for, but estimated market values from the counties lag behind the market whether it's going up or down.

If a property owner believes the value is too high, Griffin said the assessor's office will take a second look in a site review. A change in the office has eliminated the need for a review form to make an appointment in order to speed up the review process.

"The last thing we want to do is be overvalued," Griffin said.

Griffin said other changes in the assessor's office are aimed at being more customer friendly such as mailing out homestead applications to homebuyers. Without filling out the form, a homebuyer won't get a tax break for a homestead — or their main residence. In the past, applicants had to physically come to the assessor's office to apply.

Residents also should notice a few changes at the upcoming boards of review aimed at sharing more information with participants. While assessments often raise people's passions and even anger, Griffin said the goal is to treat everyone respectfully and professionally and provide the information they need to understand the process and rationale behind the assessor's decision.

"The biggest goal right now is customer service," Griffin said.

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