

OFFICE OF REAL PROPERTY SERVICES

MISSION

The Office of Real Property Services is charged with the general supervision of local property tax administration in New York. The Office plays a major role in developing the State's property tax policy and helps local governments with property tax administration in accordance with constitutional provisions for the supervision, review and equalization of local assessments for purposes of taxation.

ORGANIZATION AND STAFFING

The Office of Real Property Services is headed by the State Board of Real Property Services, a five-member Board appointed by the Governor, and its day-to-day administration is the responsibility of an Executive Director appointed by the Board. The agency has a central office in Albany and five regional offices in Batavia, Syracuse, Newburgh, Melville and Saranac Lake.

FISCAL BACKGROUND AND BUDGET HIGHLIGHTS

The 2006-07 Executive Budget will support a staffing level of 401 positions and operating expenses of \$42.6 million for the Office of Real Property Services through three revenue accounts: the Improvement of Real Property Tax Administration Account; the Industrial and Utility Services Account; and the Local Services Account. These accounts are funded from the State's share of the real property transfer recording fee, chargebacks for assessments made on industrial, utility and railroad property and charges for miscellaneous consulting and computing services.

Budget recommendations for the Office of Real Property Services for 2006-07 include funding for the following aid programs from the General Fund:

- \$5.0 million for local administration of the School Tax Relief (STAR) and STAR Plus programs;
- \$2.5 million to reimburse local governments for their revenue losses relating to the Rail Infrastructure Investment Act of 2002; and
- \$13.3 million for financial incentives for local governments to improve assessment administration through various programs that include annual updates of assessment rolls pursuant to State standards, and for reimbursement of local assessment officials for State-mandated training.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

The Office of Real Property Services is involved with all State-level responsibilities relating to the real property tax, which represents the largest revenue source for counties, towns, villages, school districts and other municipalities. Accordingly, the Office has programs to establish equalization rates which are used to estimate the full market value of taxable real property in each municipality, to provide policy guidance as well as technical and financial assistance to local assessing units, and to assist other State agencies with information and administrative support in areas that relate to property tax policy or administration.

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EQUALIZATION OF MUNICIPAL FULL VALUE

State laws permit New York's local governments to select the percentage of full value they use in assessing properties. However, every assessing unit is required to indicate its assessment ratio — i.e., the ratio of the assessed value to the full value of properties — on the assessment roll and tax bills. Using audit procedures and statistical tests on sample data, the Office of Real Property Services verifies the accuracy of the assessment ratio stated annually by each of the approximately 1,000 assessing units (i.e., cities, towns and the counties of Nassau and Tompkins). If the assessment ratio provided by a local assessor is determined to be accurate, it is established as the State equalization rate for that assessing unit; otherwise, the Office prepares an independent estimate of the local assessment ratio, which will be established as the equalization rate.

By adhering to statewide standards, the Office ensures that equalization rates can be used to estimate full values of properties in a consistent manner. Full value estimates are necessary to distribute taxes for counties and school districts when tax levies are based upon assessments by more than one assessing unit. They are also used as indicators of local fiscal capacity for several purposes, including allocation of State aid.

Increased coordination between the Office and local assessing units, as well as improvements in local assessment and reporting practices, has resulted in several notable enhancements in the equalization program. Recent accomplishments include the following:

- In 2005, the assessment ratios supplied by 82 percent of local assessors were adopted without change as State equalization rates and that rate of adoption is expected to increase again in 2006;
- Preparation of equalization rates has been accelerated so that all school districts across the State can now use current equalization rates for their school tax levies, instead of using modified rates from prior years;
- As a result of the acceleration of the preparation of equalization rates, localities and the State can now analyze market data on the same cycle, creating opportunities for efficiencies in intergovernmental collaboration;
- The number of complaints on preliminary equalization rates by local officials has dropped, resulting in reduced costs for rate complaint hearings and improved State-local relations. The percentage of cities and towns that filed complaints was approximately 2 percent in 2005, as compared to 36 percent a decade ago;
- The Office has integrated nationally accepted standards and techniques, such as computer assisted appraisal studies and residential sales studies within its equalization rate process, thereby reducing its reliance on costly appraisals. The percentage of localities where residential appraisals are needed has been reduced from 100 percent in 1994 to 7 percent in 2005; and
- Since 1994-95, the continuing base cost of the Office's equalization program has been reduced from \$17 million to \$14 million.

ASSISTANCE AND SERVICES TO LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

Since many municipal assessing units are very small-scale operations, local property tax administrators are dependent on technical assistance provided by the Office of Real Property Services. Centralized assistance to assessors and taxing jurisdictions includes administrative, legal and other technical services. In helping municipalities, the Office works closely with county offices of real property tax services, many of which have developed programs for coordinating reassessment projects on a countywide basis.

In furthering the State-local partnership in property tax administration, the Office also administers various State aid programs in support of local assessment administration, including:

- Annual aid of up to \$5 per parcel for assessing units that meet State standards, including annual revisions of assessments and comprehensive re-inventory and revaluation at least once every six years;

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- Consolidation aid providing a one-time financial incentive of up to \$12 per parcel to encourage cost-efficiency through the coordination of assessment functions performed by two or more assessing units;
- Assessor training aid to reimburse local assessment officials (including assessors and county directors of property tax services) for their cost of attending State-mandated training courses;
- STAR and STAR Plus administration aid to ensure that localities are compensated for their workload associated with the administration of the State's school tax relief programs;
- Software support which includes the development, maintenance, training and consulting relating to a state-of-the-art software program to facilitate cost-efficient administration of local property taxes; and
- Advisory appraisals for certain complex properties — such as utilities and large manufacturing plants — which require highly specialized resources that are not available to most local assessors.

These State aid programs have been a catalyst for enhancing the equity and cost-efficiency of local property tax administration throughout New York. According to recent data, nearly two-thirds of the State's assessing units prepare assessment rolls that are reasonably equitable and current. Additionally, since the introduction of consolidation aid in 1994, 108 towns in 24 counties have come together to form 46 coordinated assessment programs.

OTHER SERVICES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The Office of Real Property Services maintains inventory and valuation data on approximately 4 million acres of State-owned land and conservation easements that are subject to local taxation. Local assessments on taxable State-owned properties are scrutinized by the agency and either certified for payment or brought to administrative and judicial review, as appropriate.

In conjunction with the State Education Department and the Department of Taxation and Finance, the Office is responsible for administering the School District Income Verification program. This program verifies and corrects the school district codes reported on personal income tax returns to accurately assign personal income to school districts. These data are then used as a measure of local fiscal capacity in school aid formulas.

Special assessments are statutorily authorized for agricultural properties, transportation properties owned by railroad companies and oil and gas wells. The Office establishes values of agricultural land, ceilings on assessments of railroad properties and values of oil- and gas-producing facilities.

ALL FUNDS APPROPRIATIONS (dollars)

Category	Available 2005-06	Appropriations Recommended 2006-07	Change	Reappropriations Recommended 2006-07
State Operations	44,750,700	42,609,000	(2,141,700)	0
Aid To Localities	21,197,000	20,800,000	(397,000)	0
Capital Projects	0	0	0	0
Total	<u>65,947,700</u>	<u>63,409,000</u>	<u>(2,538,700)</u>	<u>0</u>

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ALL FUND TYPES PROJECTED LEVELS OF EMPLOYMENT BY PROGRAM FILLED ANNUAL SALARIED POSITIONS

Full-Time Equivalent Positions (FTE)

Program	2005-06	2006-07	FTE Change
	Estimated FTEs 03/31/06	Estimated FTEs 03/31/07	
Policy and Organizational Support Services			
Special Revenue Funds - Other	401	401	0
Total	401	401	0

STATE OPERATIONS ALL FUNDS FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS BY FUND TYPE APPROPRIATIONS (dollars)

Fund Type	Available	Recommended	Change
	2005-06	2006-07	
Special Revenue Funds - Other	44,750,700	42,609,000	(2,141,700)
Total	44,750,700	42,609,000	(2,141,700)

STATE OPERATIONS ALL FUNDS FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS BY PROGRAM APPROPRIATIONS (dollars)

Program	Available	Recommended	Change
	2005-06	2006-07	
Policy and Organizational Support Services			
Special Revenue Funds - Other	44,750,700	42,609,000	(2,141,700)
Total	44,750,700	42,609,000	(2,141,700)

STATE OPERATIONS - OTHER THAN GENERAL FUND SUMMARY OF APPROPRIATIONS AND CHANGES 2006-07 RECOMMENDED (dollars)

Program	Total		Personal Service	
	Amount	Change	Amount	Change
Policy and Organizational Support Services	42,609,000	(2,141,700)	23,433,000	(686,000)
Total	42,609,000	(2,141,700)	23,433,000	(686,000)

Program	Nonpersonal Service		Maintenance Undistributed	
	Amount	Change	Amount	Change
Policy and Organizational Support Services	19,176,000	244,300	0	(1,700,000)
Total	19,176,000	244,300	0	(1,700,000)

AID TO LOCALITIES ALL FUNDS FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS BY FUND TYPE APPROPRIATIONS (dollars)

Fund Type	Available	Recommended	Change
	2005-06	2006-07	
General Fund	21,197,000	20,800,000	(397,000)
Total	21,197,000	20,800,000	(397,000)

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**AID TO LOCALITIES
ALL FUNDS FINANCIAL REQUIREMENTS BY PROGRAM
APPROPRIATIONS
(dollars)**

Program	Available 2005-06	Recommended 2006-07	Change
Policy and Organizational Support Services			
General Fund	21,197,000	20,800,000	(397,000)
Total	<u>21,197,000</u>	<u>20,800,000</u>	<u>(397,000)</u>