

TIMES • LEADER

Reassessor gets high marks

21st Century Appraisals Inc. will likely get the contract to reappraise area properties.

EXCLUSIVE

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Seven counties that used 21st Century Appraisals Inc. to perform countywide reassessments in recent years say they'd hire the company again.

Indeed, three of them have.

That's nice to know because 21st Century will likely be entrusted to conduct Luzerne County's first reassessment since 1965. An unsigned draft contract shows the contract would pay the firm about \$7.5 million for the work.

"If anyone asks me, they'll get a glow-

ing recommendation," said Luzerne County Administration Director Andy Follmer. "Not only do I like them, I trust them emphatically. Their assessments are on the mark. They're very efficient and able to back up their assessments with certified appraisals."

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Perry County Chief Assessor Randy Waggoner said the company makes the reassessment process "very taxpayer friendly."

"They try to keep the public as in the know as possible," Waggoner said. "If someone asked me if I'd use 21st Century again to do a reassessment, my answer would definitely be yes."

Officials in Cumberland, McKean, Tioga, Venango and Centre counties also praised 21st Century's reassessments.

A Penn State study finds eight counties reassessed by 21st Century also have the top eight rankings for tax uniformity. That means property owners in those counties pay taxes based on accurate fair-market values.

Cumberland County, the top-ranked county in tax fairness, recently rehired 21st Century to oversee its in-house update reassessment, which will update assessments since the county's complete reassessment in 2000.

"The fact that we hired them to do our original reassessment and contracted with them again to do this should speak volumes," said Cumberland County Chief Assessor Bonnie Mahoney, who wrote a letter of recommendation for 21st Century to Luzerne County officials.

Regardless of which reassessment company does the work, McKean County Board of Commissioners Chairman Lawrence Stratton warns that complaints will invariably crop up when a county hasn't reassessed in decades.

"Overall, I'd say we were satisfied with 21st Century. They

did a good job," Stratton said. "They had a more down-to-earth approach. The thing that bothered us with some of the other companies is they sort of had more of a Madison Avenue approach."

Even Tioga County Commissioner Walter Barnes said he'd likely hire 21st Century again — an immense compliment because he opposed reassessment from the start and watched the company like a hawk, pouncing each time he saw something he didn't like.

He said he found minor problems throughout the process with some field work and the quality of a few of the digital photos of properties.

But he said some of those stemmed from an unrealistic implementation schedule that meant the company had physically examine properties in sloppy winter weather.

"If they're ready to start now in Luzerne County I think that would help because they did a lot of the work in townships and boroughs in the winter here," Barnes said.

Barnes had two pieces of advice: Don't rush the job and keep close tabs to make sure 21st Century has Luzerne County's project on the front burner.

He sensed 21st Century headquarters was spread somewhat thin while working on Tioga County's reassessment because the company was wrapping up simultaneous reassessments in Perry, Cumberland and Venango counties.

"They were still cleaning up three other counties and getting us on the front end," Barnes said. "If they're still monkeying with the tail end of others while handling Luzerne's, then that's not good."

Robert Barr said his company maintains adequate staff to han-

dle its growing workload and is equipped to handle the Luzerne County job.

He said Luzerne County should take confidence in 21st Century's success to juggle reassessments in three counties. Luzerne County would be 21st Century's biggest single contract to date, with 155,000 properties plus cellular phone towers, billboards and mineral rights.

Barr said the three counties reassessed at the same time were more of a challenge because the total number of properties added up to the number in Luzerne. The properties were spread over three geographic areas, and each county had unique problems. All three ended up in the top ranking of the Penn State study.

Luzerne County's proposed contract with 21st Century offers extra protection because it holds the company to a schedule and requires timely response to all county inquiries and the use of qualified personnel for the reassessment.

Venango County Commissioner Robert Murray said commissioners recently rehired 21st Century to do an update reassessment in 2004. The company handled the county's 2000 reassessment, its first since 1958. "I don't think I can give them any higher marks than to rehire them."

He advised Luzerne County folks to brace themselves because there will be some chaos and confusion — regardless of who conducts the reassessment — because the county hasn't reassessed in so long.

"What every taxpayer needs to understand is this will be like a freight train crashing into a brick wall. It will be a very traumatic process, but it's essential if people are serious about fair taxes."