

MASS APPRAISING

In preceding sections, we have outlined the fundamental concepts, principles, and valuation techniques underlying the Appraisal Process. We will now approach the problem at hand.... The reappraisal of certain specified real property within a total taxing jurisdiction, be it an entire county or any subdivision thereof... and to structure a systematic mass appraisal program to effect the appraisal of said properties in such a way as to yield valid, accurate, and equitable property valuations at a reasonable cost dictated by budgetary limitations, and within a time span totally compatible with assessing administration needs.

The key elements of the program are validity, accuracy, equity, economy, and efficiency. To be effective, the program must

- Incorporate the application of proven and professionally acceptable techniques and procedures;
- Provide for the compilation of complete and accurate data and the processing of that data into an indication of value approximating the prices actually being paid in the market place;
- Provide the necessary standardization measures and quality controls essential to promoting and maintaining uniformity throughout the jurisdiction;
- Provide the appropriate production controls necessary to execute each phase of the operation in accordance with a carefully planned budget and work schedule and-
- Provide techniques especially designed to streamline each phase of the operation, eliminating superfluous functions, and reducing the complexities inherent in the Appraisal Process to more simplified but equally effective procedures.

In summary, the objective of an individual appraisal is to arrive at an opinion of value, the key elements being the validity of the approach and the accuracy of the estimate. The objective of a mass appraisal for tax purposes is essentially the same. However, in addition to being valid and accurate, the value of each property must be equitable to that of each other property, and what's more, these valid, accurate, and equitable valuations must be generated as economically and efficiently as possible.

OVERVIEW

The prime objective of mass appraisals for tax purposes is to equalize property values. Not only must the value of one residential property be equalized with another, but it must also be equalized with each agricultural, commercial, and industrial property within the political unit.

The common denominator or the basis for equalization is market value... that price which an informed and intelligent person, fully aware of the existence of competing properties and not being compelled to act, is justified in paying for a particular property.

The job of the appraiser is to arrive at a reasonable estimate of that justified price. To accomplish this, the coordination of approaches to the valuation of the various classes of property must be made so that they are related one to another in such a way as to reflect the motives of the prospective purchasers of each type of property.

A prospective purchaser of a residential property is primarily interested in its capacity to render service to the family as a place to live. Its location, size, quality, design, age, condition, desirability and usefulness are the primary factors to be considered in making a selection. By relying heavily upon powers of observation and inherent intelligence, knowing what could be afforded and simply comparing what is available, one property will eventually stand out to be more appealing than another. So it is likewise the job of the appraisers to evaluate the relative degree of appeal of one property to another for tax purposes.

The prospective purchaser of agricultural property will be motivated somewhat differently. The primary interest will be in the productive capabilities of the land. It is reasonable to assume that the purchaser will be familiar, at least in a general way, with the productive capacity of the farm. It might be expected that the prudent investor will have compared one farm's capabilities against another. Accordingly, the appraiser for local tax equalization purposes must rely heavily upon prices being paid for comparable farmland in the community.

The prospective purchaser of commercial property is primarily interested in the potential net return and tax shelter the property will provide. That price which is justified to pay for the property is a measure of the prospects for a net return from the investment. Real estate, as an investment then, must not only compete with other real estate, but also with stocks, bonds, annuities, and other similar investment areas. The commercial appraiser must explore the rental market and compare the income-producing capabilities of one property to another.

The prospective purchaser of industrial property is primarily interested in the overall utility value of the property. Of course, in evaluating the overall utility, individual consideration must be given to the land and each improvement thereon. Industrial buildings are generally of special purpose design, and as such, cannot readily be divorced from the operation for which they were built. As long as the operation remains effective, the building will hold its value; if the operation becomes obsolete, the building likewise becomes obsolete. The upper limit of its value is its replacement cost new, and its present day value is some measure of its present day usefulness in relation to the purpose for which it was originally designed.

Any effective approach to valuations for tax purposes must be patterned in such a way as to reflect the “modus operandi” of buyers in the market place. As indicated above, the motives influencing prospective buyers tend to differ depending upon the type of property involved. It follows that the appraiser’s approach to value must differ accordingly.

The residential appraiser must rely heavily upon the market data approach to value... analyzing the selling prices of comparable properties and considering the very same factors of location, size, quality, design, age, condition, desirability, and usefulness, which were considered by the buyer.

The commercial appraiser will find that since commercial property is not bought and sold as frequently as is residential property, the sales market cannot be readily established. By relying heavily on the income approach to value, the net economic rent that the property is capable of yielding can be determined, and the amount of investment required to effect that net return at a rate commensurate with that normally expected by investors could also be determined. This can only be achieved through a comprehensive study of the income producing capabilities of comparable properties and an analysis of present-day investment practices.

The industrial appraiser will not be able to rely on the market data approach because of the absence of comparable sales, each sale generally reflecting different circumstances and conditions. Also, it is not possible to rely upon the income approach... again because of the absence of comparable investments, and because on the inability to accurately determine the contribution of each unit of production to the overall income produced. Therefore, by relying heavily on the cost approach to value, a determination must be made of the upper limit or replacement cost new of each improvement and the subsequent loss of value resulting overall from physical, functional, and economic factors.

The fact that there are different approaches to value, some of which are more applicable to one class of property than to another, does not, by any means, preclude equalization between classes. Remember that the objective in each approach is to arrive at a price which an informed and intelligent person, fully aware of the existence of competing properties and not being compelled to act, is justified in paying for any one particular property. Underlying, and fundamental to each of the approaches is the comparison process. Regardless of whether the principal criteria are actual selling prices, income producing capabilities, or functional usefulness, like properties must be treated alike. The primary objective is equalization. The various approaches to value, although valid in themselves, must nevertheless be coordinated one to the other in such a way as to produce values that are not only valid and accurate, but are also equitable. The same “yardstick” of values must be applied to all properties, and must be applied by systematic and uniform procedures.

It is obvious that sales on all properties are not required to effectively apply the market data approach. The same is true regarding any other approach. What is needed is a comprehensive record of all the significant physical and economic characteristics of each

Property in order to compare the properties of “unknown” values with the properties of “known” values. All significant differences between properties must in some measure, either positively or negatively, be reflected in the final estimate of value.

Each property must be given individual treatment, but the treatment must be uniform and standardized, and essentially no different than that given to any other property. All the factors affecting value must be analyzed and evaluated for each and every property within the entire political unit. It is only by doing this that equalization between properties and between classes of properties can be ultimately effected.

All this, at best, is an oversimplification of the equalization process underlying the entire Mass Appraisal Program. The program itself consists of various operational phases, and its success depends primarily upon the systematic coordination of collecting and recording data, analyzing the data, and processing the data to an indication of value.

DATA INVENTORY

Basic to the appraisal process is the collecting and recording of pertinent data. The data will consist of general supporting data, referring to the data required to develop the elements essential to the valuation process; neighborhood data, referring to information regarding pre-delineated neighborhood units; and specific property data, referring to the data compiled for each parcel of property to be processed into an indication of value by the cost, market and/or income approach.

The data must be comprehensive enough to allow for the adequate consideration of all factors that significantly affect property values. In keeping with the economics of a mass appraisal program, it is costly and impractical to collect, maintain, and process data of no or marginal contribution to the desired objectives. The axiom “too much data is better than insufficient data” does not apply. What does apply is the proper amount of data, no more or no less, which is necessary to provide the database necessary to generate the desired output.

Cost data must be sufficient enough to develop or select and validate the pricing schedules and cost tables required to compute the replacement cost new of improvements needed to apply the cost approach value.

All data pertaining to the cost of total buildings in place should include the parcel identification number, property address, and date of completion, construction cost, name of builder, source of information, structural characteristics, and other information pertinent to analysis.

Cost information may be recorded on the same form (unassigned property record card) used to record specific property data.

The principal sources for obtaining cost data are builders, suppliers, and developers, and it is generally advisable to collect cost data in conjunction with new construction pick-ups.

Sales data must be sufficient enough to provide a representative sampling of comparable sales needed to apply the market data approach, to derive unit land values and depreciation indicators needed to apply the cost approach, and to derive gross rent multipliers and elements of the capitalization rate needed to apply the income approach.

All sales data should include the parcel identification number, property qualification code, month and year of sale, selling price, source of information, i.e., buyer, seller, agent, or fee, and a reliable judgment as to whether or not the sale is representative of a true arm's length transaction.

Sales data should be recorded on the same form (assigned property record card) used to record specific property data, and verified during the property-listing phase.

The principal source for obtaining sales data is the County Register of Deeds Office, MLS, Sales Letters, Fee Appraisers and real estate transfer returns. Other sources may include developers, realtors, lending institutions, and individual owners during the listing phase of the operation.

Income and expense data must be sufficient enough to derive capitalization rates and accurate estimates of net income needed to apply the income approach. Income and expense data should include both general data regarding existing financial attitudes and practices, and specific data regarding the actual incomes and expenses realized by specific properties.

The general data should include such information as equity return expectations, gross rentals, vacancy and operating cost expectations and trends, prevailing property management costs, and prevailing mortgage costs.

Specific data should include the parcel identification number, property address (or building ID), source of information, the amount of equity, the mortgage and lease terms, and an itemized account of the annual gross income, vacancy loss, and operating expenses for the most recent two-year period.

The general data should be documented in conjunction with the development of capitalization procedural guidelines. The specific data, since it is often considered confidential and not subject to public access, should be recorded on special forms, designed in such a way as to accommodate the property owner or agent thereof in submitting the required information. The forms should also have space reserved for the appraiser's analysis and calculations.

The principal sources for obtaining the general financial data are investors, lending institutions, fee appraisers and property managers. The primary sources for obtaining specific data are the individual property owners and/or tenants during the listing phase of the operation.

Neighborhood data. At the earliest feasible time during the data inventory phase of the operation, and after a thorough consideration of the living environment and economic characteristics of the overall county, or any political subdivision thereof, the appraisal staff should delineate the larger jurisdictions into smaller “neighborhood units”, each exhibiting a high degree of homogeneity in residential amenities, land use, economic trends, and housing characteristics such as structural quality, age, and condition. The neighborhood delineation should be outlined on an index (or comparable) map and each assigned an arbitrary Neighborhood Identification Code, which when combined with the parcel identification numbering system, will serve to uniquely identify it from other neighborhoods.

Neighborhood data must be comprehensive enough to permit the adequate consideration of value-influencing factors to determine the variations in selling prices and income yields attributable to benefits arising from the location of one specific property as compared to another. The data should include the taxing district, the school district, the neighborhood identification code, special reasons for delineation (other than obvious physical and economic boundaries), and various neighborhood characteristics such as the type (urban, suburban, etc.) , the predominant class (residential, commercial, etc.), the trend (whether it is declining, improving, or relatively stable), its accessibility to the central business district, shopping centers, interstate highways and primary transportation terminals, its housing characteristics, the estimated range of selling prices for residentially-improved properties, and a rating of its relative durability.

All neighborhood data should be recorded on a specially designed form during the delineation phase.

Specific property data must be comprehensive enough to provide the data base needed to process each parcel of property to an indication of value, to generate the tax roll requirements, to generate other specified output, and to provide the assessing officials with a permanent record to facilitate maintenance functions and to administer taxpayer assistance and grievance proceedings.

The data should include the parcel identification number, ownership and mailing address, legal description, property address, property classification code, local zoning code, neighborhood identification code, site characteristics, and structural characteristics.

All the data should be recorded on a single, specially-designed property record card customized to meet individual assessing needs. Each card should be designed and formatted in such a way as to accommodate the listing of information and to facilitate data processing. In addition to the property data items noted above, space must be

provided for a building sketch, land and building computations, summarization, and memoranda. In keeping with the economy and efficiency of a mass appraisal program, the card should be formatted to minimize writing by including a sufficient amount of site and structural descriptive data that can be checked and/or circled. The descriptive data should be comprehensive enough to be suitable for listing any type of land and improvement data regardless of class, with the possible exception of large industrial, institutional, and utility complexes that require lengthy descriptions. In these cases, it will generally be necessary to use specially-designed supplemental property record document, keyed and indexed to the corresponding property record card. The property record card should be made a permanent part of the assessing system, and used not only in conjunction with the revaluation, but also to update the property records for subsequent assessments.

The specific property data should be compiled from existing assessing records and field inspections. The parcel identification number, ownership, mailing address, and legal description may be obtained from existing tax rolls (whenever available) and verified in the field. Local zoning codes may be obtained from existing zoning maps. Neighborhood identification codes may be obtained from the neighborhood delineation maps. Lot sizes and acreage may be obtained from existing tax maps. The property address, and the site and structural characteristics may be obtained by making a physical inspection of each property.

In transferring lot sizes from the tax maps to the property record cards, the personnel performing the tasks must be specially trained in the use of standardized lot sizing techniques and depth tables, may be used, which are necessary to adjust irregular shaped lots and abnormal depths to account for variations from predetermined norms. In regard to acreage, the total acreage may be transferred, but the acreage breakdowns required to effect the valuation of agricultural, residential, forestry, commercial, and industrial properties must be obtained in the field from the property owner and verified by personal observation and aerial photographs, if available.

Field inspections must be conducted by qualified listers under the close supervision of the appraisal staff. During this phase of the operation, the lister must visit each property and attempt personal contact with the occupant. In the course of the inspection, the following procedures must be adhered to.

Identification of the property.

Recording the property address.

Interviewing the occupant of the building and recording all pertinent data.

Inspection, when possible, of the interior of the building and recording of all pertinent physical data.

Measuring and inspecting the exterior of the building, as well as all other improvements on the property, and recording the story height, and the dimensions and/or size of each.

Recording a sketch of the principal building(s), consisting of a plan view showing the main portion of the structure along with any significant attached exterior features, such as porches, etc. All components must be identified and the exterior dimensions shown for each.

Selection of and recording the proper quality grade of the improvement.

Selection of and recording the proper adjustments for all field priced items.

Reviewing the property record card for completeness and accuracy.

After the field inspection is completed, the property record cards must be submitted to clerical personnel to review the cards for completeness, calculate the areas, and make any necessary mathematical extensions.

Complete and accurate data are essential to the program. Definite standardized data collection and recording procedures must be followed if these objectives are to be met.

PROCESSING THE DATA

This phase of the operation involves the analysis of data compiled during the data inventory phase and the processing of that data to an indication of value through the use of the cost, market, and income approaches to value.

During the analytical phase, it will be necessary to analyze cost, market, and income data in order to provide a basis for validating the appropriate cost schedules and tables required to compute the replacement cost new of all buildings and structures; for establishing comparative unit land values for each class of property; for establishing the appropriate depreciation tables and guidelines for each class of property; and for developing gross rent multipliers, economic rent and operating expense norms, capitalization rate tables and other related standards and norms required to effect the mass appraisal of all the property within an entire political unit on an equitable basis.

After establishing the appropriate standards and norms, it remains to analyze the specific data compiled for each property by giving due consideration to the factors influencing the value of that particular property as compared to another, and then to process the data into an indication of value by employing the techniques described in the section of the manual dealing with the application of the traditional approaches to value.

Any one, or all three of the approaches, if applied properly, should lead to an indication of market value; of primary concern is applying the approaches on an equitable basis. This will require the coordinated effort of a number of individual appraisers, each appraiser acting as a member of a team, with the team effort directed toward a valid, accurate and equitable appraisal of each property within the political unit. Each property must be physically reviewed, during which time the following procedures must be adhered to.

- Verification of the characteristics recorded on the property record card.
- Certification that the proper schedules and cost tables were used in computing the replacement cost of each building and structure.
- Determination of the proper quality grade and design factor to be applied to each building to account for variations from the base specifications.
- Making a judgement of the overall condition, desirability, and usefulness of each improvement in order to arrive at a sound allowance for depreciation.
- Capitalization of net income capabilities into an indication of value in order to determine the loss of value attributable to functional and economic obsolescence.
- Addition of the depreciated value of all improvements to the land value, and reviewing the total property value in relation to the value of comparable properties.

At the completion of the review phase, the property record cards must be, once again, submitted to clerical personnel for final mathematical calculations and extensions, and a final check for completeness and accuracy.

Once the final values have been established for each property, the entire program should be evaluated in terms of its primary objectives.... Do the values approximate a satisfactory level of market value, and what's more important, are the values equitable? Satisfactory answers to these questions can best be obtained through a statistical analysis of recent sales in an appraisal-to-sale ratio study, if sufficient sales are available.

To perform the study, it is necessary to take a representative sampling of recent valid sales and compute the appraisal-to-sale ratio for each of the sales. If the sample is representative, the computed median appraisal-to-sale ratio will give an indication of how close the appraisals within each district approximates the market value. This is providing, of course, that the sales included represent true market transactions. It is then necessary to determine the deviation of each individual appraisal-to-sale ratio from the median ratio, and to compute either the average of the standard deviation, which will give an indication of the degree of equity within each individual district. What remains then is to compare the statistical measures across the property class in order to determine those areas, if any,

which need to be further investigated, revising the appraisal, if necessary, to attain a satisfactory level of value and equity throughout the entire jurisdiction.

The techniques and procedures set forth herein, if applied skillfully, should yield highly accurate and equitable property valuations, and should provide a sound property tax base. It should be noted, however, that no program, regardless of how skillfully administered, can ever be expected to be error-free. The appraisal must be fine-tuned and this can best be done by giving the taxpayer an opportunity to question the value placed upon his property and to produce evidence that the value is inaccurate or inequitable. During this time, the significant errors will be brought to light, and taking the property corrective action will serve to further the objectives of the program. What's important in the final analysis is to use all these measures as well as any other resources available to effect the highest degree of accuracy and equity possible.