



To: Honorable John P. Daley, *Chairman*
Cook County Board of Commissioners, Finance Committee

From: Sarah Garza Resnick
Chief Deputy Assessor
Cook County Assessor's Office

CC: Annette C.M. Guzman, *Budget Director*
Department of Budget & Management Services

Date: 11/6/2020

Re: Request for Information from FY2021 Department Budget Hearing

The following information is provided in response to questions posed at our department's hearing held on November 2, 2020 to discuss the FY2021 Executive Budget Recommendation.

- 1. Request ID# 1040-01.** Commissioner Miller asked if the office could provide any metrics related to outreach performed in the midst of COVID-19?

Please find a memo from Director of Outreach Kelwin Harris attached.

- 2. 501210-Planned Overtime Compensation.** FY19 expenditures were \$1,184,228.7 or 1,084% over budget. Expenditures as of August 31st for FY20 are \$252K or 84% of budget. 5 yr. avg. is \$213K. *What accounted for the big jump in OT expenditures in FY19 and what is being done to keep it under control?*

There are two underlying reasons for these big jumps in OT, both of which our office is working to address.

The first is that our office is still extremely understaffed as compared to industry standards. According to the comprehensive Practices & Procedures Audit conducted by the International Association of Assessing Officers in 2019, the CCAO is running at approximately one-fourth recommended staffing levels, particularly in the areas of field and data collection staff, and the supervisors needed to direct them. In FY2020 our office has made good progress towards correcting this and by forming the new Data Integrity unit, hiring nine new data collectors and four new assistant managers of data collection who will perform property inspections both in the field and with GIS technologies and aerial imagery. Our office continues to hire crucial valuations staff, who will bring us closer to recommended staffing levels, cutting down on the need for overtime.

The second underlying cause of these large swings in our office's use of overtime is that in recent years, the assessment calendar has tended to "backload" the largest townships, meaning that the volume of appeals coming into our office is not spread evenly throughout the year, but is instead concentrated in the late summer and fall. To meet our deadlines and close the assessment cycle in a timely manner, our office has had to grant overtime in order to get through the backlog. Working with our partners in the President's Office, the Clerk's Office, and the Board of Review, we have proposed an assessment calendar for 2021 that addresses this problem and spreads the largest townships more evenly throughout the year. Because of all the outside contingencies that the assessment cycle relies on (when BOR closes and the receiving of permits) this type of change to the calendar must be done iteratively and will take a couple of years to change fully.

- 3. 501765-Professional Develop/Fees.** FY21 appropriation is \$200,835, a \$14K or 8% increase. *What training programs will be utilized since this is a large appropriation compared to historical trend in expenditures?*

Another area of focus in the IAAO's Practices & Procedures Audit is the training and professional development of staff. Under the previous administration, training was not a top priority, many members of the staff saw their professional designations lapse, and many more members of the staff still have not received the beginning levels of instruction in assessment methodology. Our office has been working to address this legacy of disinvestment in training and professional development by working closely with the IAAO to develop a virtual training program for 2021. Nearly our entire valuations department (both new hires and tenured staff) will go through the beginning and intermediate courses offered by the IAAO, while staff members who are on the path to receiving their professional designations (in many cases, a job requirement for managers and directors), will have the opportunity to continue this work with the support of our office. Better trained staff will lead to higher quality assessments.

- 4. 520259-Postage.** FY21 appropriation is \$1 mil., a \$900K increase. *What is driving this large increase?*

Our office is mandated by state statute to notify property owners of any change to their assessment, which we do through the mailing of notices. In 2021 we reassess the City of Chicago, which contains over 52% of Cook County's 1.8 Million parcels. The increase in FY21 appropriation for postage is due to the large size of the City of Chicago.

- 5. 520629-Advertising & Promotions.** FY21 appropriation is about \$1.2 million, a \$371K or 47% increase. *What is the increase for?*

Also mandated by the Illinois Property Tax Code is the publishing of all changes to assessments in local newspapers. The increase in FY21 appropriation is also due to the reassessment of the City of Chicago, and the number of parcels in the City.

- 6. 520825-Professional Services.** FY21 appropriation is \$1.2 mil., a \$375K or 45% increase. *What contracts/programs will this increase fund?*

In FY20 our office made it a top priority to research and procure the best third-party data sources available. Fair and accurate assessments rely on high quality data. In 2019 and 2020 our office acquired a number of new data sources that fall under the umbrella of professional services: REIS/Moody's, Pushpin, The Exemption Project, and Trepp. In FY20 we were able to secure CARES funding to pay for some of these services, where they were eligible under the federal guidelines. In FY21, the increase in professional services will allow us to continue utilizing these crucial data sources to produce high quality assessments.

- 7. 5179 & 7720 FTE.** *What's the difference between these positions under Administration both say Chief Deputy Assessor and the 5179-line item is being removed?*

The position identified as "5179-Chief Deputy Assessor-Assessor" was a non-budgeted position left over from a prior year. It was removed in the FY21 budget to correct this error.

- 8. Erroneous Investigations Unit.** *It appears that 3 FTE's are being moved from the Homestead Exemption fund to the GIS fund. Is this the case and why are they being moved?*

These positions have been moved as we continue to make changes to how our office identifies erroneous homestead exemptions. Where previously this has been a very manual process of research (as well as following up on tips submitted to our whistleblower site), we are working with a new vendor (The Exemption Project) to develop a data-informed process that will identify and prioritize possible erroneous exemptions from a wide variety of data sources.



COVID-19 Outreach and Engagement Report

Assessment, Exemption and Appeals Seminars: March-October 2020

The Outreach and Engagement Division of the Cook County Assessor's Office (CCAO) began 2020 with a series of seminars and events focused on two key initiatives:

- Ensuring all residential property owners receive their tax bill exemptions through in-person, public seminars by the Outreach team
- Explaining the methodology, and vision of the office for 2020 through public appearances by Assessor Fritz Kaegi (City Club of Chicago, CBRE, and local media)

The COVID-19 crisis led to closure of County offices to the public during the second week of March. On March 27th, the Assessor's Office began video outreach presentations to the public and was the first countywide office to do so. The following is a quantitative look at the impact of video seminars conducted by the CCAO between March and October 31st.



45% of video outreach seminars during this time were focused on the south and west suburbs. 20% of video outreach seminars during this time were conducted in Spanish. According to the American Community Survey, 21% of the people in Cook County are native Spanish speakers.

The above data does not include Zoom-based meetings conducted by the Assessor and other members of his leadership team with local community groups, elected officials, and others. A full accounting of these 2020 meetings will be available in an updated CCAO Visitors' Log in mid-November.