

# The Columbus Dispatch

» Hot Links:

## EDITORIAL

# Tempering taxation

### ABOUT OUR EDITORIALS

*Dispatch* editorials express the view of the *Dispatch* editorial board, which is made up of the publisher, the president of *The Dispatch*, the editor and the editorial-writing staff. As is the traditional newspaper practice, the editorials are unsigned and intended to be seen as the voice of the newspaper. Comments and questions should be directed to the editorial page editor.

### ABOUT THE DISPATCH

An independent newspaper serving Ohio since July 1, 1871.

- John F. Wolfe: Chairman and Publisher
- Michael J. Fiorile: President and Chief Executive Officer
- Jon B. Schwantes: Corporate Director of News
- Benjamin J. Marrison: Editor
- Glenn Sheller: Editorial Page Editor

### ALSO IN OPINION

- Editorials
- Op-Ed Columns

Sunday June 22, 2014 6:59 AM

Comments: 1

11

7

25

A first-of-its-kind mediation program in Franklin County is expediting tax adjustments for overbilled property owners, while creating a convenient and fair process to determine an accurate valuation.

This shows what government officials can accomplish by working cooperatively across agency lines with each other and with the public to solve thorny problems.

The mediation program, started a year ago in June, already has cleared away a backlog of more than 4,300 cases, some of which might have taken months or years longer to reach a Board of Appeals hearing.

In every case mediated, the property owners won lowered values.

This reflects that the cases pulled for mediation typically are the ones that are easiest to resolve, often because recent comparable sales or a professional appraisal establishes a fair-market price.

The compromise and agreement achieved by these settlements are a win for all taxpayers, because fairness is the foundation of the entire system: Everyone pays a fair share of levies that support schools, libraries and social programs. If someone pays too little, other taxpayers get stuck with higher bills. If someone pays too much, other taxpayers unfairly get a break.

Accurate values are important so no one is cheated and public trust in government isn't eroded.

Another reason for the program's success is that those who conduct the mediation program do a good job of threading the needle: Property owners who have been through the process say the mediators are professional, listen to their arguments and are willing to find a number, often somewhere in between, that both sides agree is reasonable.

And the process is easy; cases can be settled in a scheduled phone call with the property owner, a representative of the auditor's office and an independent third-party mediator.

Landlord Ron Stutzman, who went through mediation earlier this month, said he just wanted a fair assessment. He was satisfied, saying, "On a scale of 1 to 10, I'd give them a 10."

Credit goes to Franklin County Auditor Clarence Mingo, Commissioner Marilyn Brown and Treasurer Ed Leonard, who sit on the Board of Revision and worked for more than three years to devise a better way to handle complaints after the recession swamped them with appeals.

Mingo told *The Dispatch* that local governments across the state were caught off guard by the torrent. After years of steady climbs, property values flattened out or even declined.

Homeowners appealed to the Board of Revision for tax relief.

In 2011, a record-breaking 14,000 property owners challenged their valuations — up from 8,000 a year earlier.

The county turned to the Ohio Supreme Court's dispute-resolution program for help in tailoring training for their tax mediators. It was the first time the high court had worked with a public entity other than a court on a mediation project.

The collaboration paid off. Franklin County's mediation process now serves as a model for other counties.