

ST. LAWRENCE COUNTY INTER-MUNICIPAL TAX COLLECTION SYSTEM

St. Lawrence County, through cooperation with local governments, towns, schools, and villages, has instituted a county-wide tax collection system. All municipalities, with the exception of the city of Ogdensburg are on this system.

Prior to initiating this program, each local government was on a different system. Some were automated, but none used the same vendor; some collected all their taxes manually and manually wrote receipts. The automated systems were unstable and difficult to use. We had a difficult time getting the unpaid taxes from the localities and there were numerous communication issues. The prior system was very labor intensive.

The St. Lawrence County Treasurer's Office took the lead on creating a cooperative effort between the County, Municipalities, and Schools. The County provided the funding, in the first instance, for the purchase of the software and maintenance of the software. There needed to be an agreement on the requirements to allow a "bulk purchase" of hardware to provide savings. One of the funding mechanisms came about when the county adopted the three installment payment of taxes for the town and county taxes and the school taxes under Title 4-A of Article 9 of the Real property Tax Law in 1993. At the time the law allowed a service charge. That service charge has been used to fund this county-wide tax collection system. In 1997, section 972 of the Real Property Tax Law was amended to remove the service charge provision. There should be consideration for allowing a service charge again for those counties wishing to implement this model.

There was a lot of teamwork involved in setting up this system. There was a core group of knowledgeable tax collectors and forward thinking county management that made joint decisions on the software along with a cooperative software vendor.

The functions that needed to be accomplished were:

1. Town, county, village, and school tax collection
2. collection of delinquent taxes on the same system
3. foreclosure and deed printing
4. installment contracts for delinquent taxes
5. internet access to tax rolls
6. credit card payment of taxes on line
7. tax bill printing at the county

The system had to be:

1. user friendly
2. able to check for errors and balance daily payments
3. common software throughout the county
4. automatic data transfer between all the participating municipalities
5. a reduction in labor and management

A vendor was selected and implementation began.

Benefits realized were:

1. labor was reduced and a drastic reduction in phone calls
2. errors in collection were considerably reduced; a completely user friendly system
3. training was coordinated and reduced; considerably less vendor support
4. there is total integration of real property taxes from point of collection to management of delinquencies and tax enforcement
5. tax collection rate in excess of 94%, especially due to the installment option
6. cash flow greatly improved

Another improvement that we could implement is to allow partial payment of real property taxes in any amount. We would like to have state legislation for this option.