



FY24 Periodic Audit Report

TAX ASSESSOR'S OFFICE

FY24 Periodic Departmental Mission, Operations & Internal Controls Audit

Tax Assessor's Office

Report Number 2024P-08



The mission of the Office of Operational Analysis is to provide quality internal audit services through independent and objective reviews and assessments of the activities, operations, financial systems and internal accounting controls that support the Mayor & Commission's adopted goals and strategies; to make recommendations that will improve governance, risk management, control processes and value for money, all with the intent of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of government operations for the benefit of Athens-Clarke County.

In accordance with Sec. 1-3-1 (b)(1) of the Athens-Clarke County Code of Ordinances, the Internal Auditor shall:

"Conduct reviews and analysis of operational and fiscal procedures and organizational structure and responsibilities as affects the efficiency and effectiveness of departments, offices, boards, activities, and agencies of the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County."

Audit Committee

Commissioner Dexter Fisher, Chair
Commissioner Carol Myers
Carl Blount
Beth Higgins
Dr. Xernona Thomas

Copies Available At:

301 College Avenue
Suite 202
Athens, Georgia 30601
Phone: 706-613-3012

Staff Acknowledgements

Judy Johnston, Management Analyst
Katie Roth, Management Analyst
Thomas Wilkerson, Intern

Office of Operational Analysis Contact:

Gavin J. Hassemer, Internal Auditor
gavin.hassemer@accgov.com
706-613-3012

The Office of Operational Analysis (OA) conducted this audit with voluntary guidance and reference from the US Government Accountability Office publication Government Auditing Standards, also commonly referred to as "generally accepted government accounting standards" (GAGAS), or "Yellow Book." Acknowledgement of these standards indicates our continued efforts to incorporate applicable professional practices that are realistic and adaptive to the unique expectations of ACCGov and the community at large. The Periodic Audit process developed by the Office of Operational Analysis is not a forensic audit; however, OA staff uses framework from the Standards for Internal Control in the Federal Government, known as the "Green Book," as guidance for internal control and financial review. Green Book compliance helps provide reasonable assurance that evidence discovered is sufficient and appropriate to support findings and recommendations.

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Executive Summary

Office of Operational Analysis

The Office of Operational Analysis is pleased to present the FY24 Periodic Departmental Mission, Operations and Internal Controls Audit for the Tax Assessor's Office. This report highlights the important services provided to the community by the Tax Assessor's Office, and how they approach such responsibility as a department, in both objectives and performance. Focus was primarily directed toward the assessment of applicable financial and operational processes to determine reliability, use of resources, and adherence to regulations.

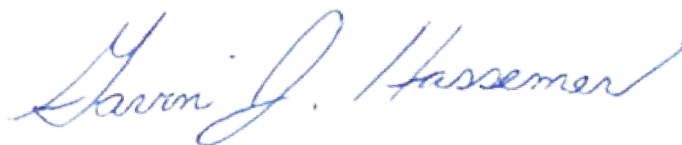
This audit is intended to serve as a resource for ACCGov and the community. The report signifies the role of Operational Analysis to guide efficiency and effectiveness throughout a complex governmental system. The main purpose and scope are outlined in greater detail within the document, along with the most significant findings discovered during the review. Lesser concerning items were presented and discussed with the department and county management during the audit, as appropriate, and may not have warranted inclusion in the report. All findings and recommendations, regardless of significance, have been brought to the attention of applicable staff and the Audit Committee prior to public release. The full list of formal findings, recommendations, and responses, along with informal points of interest or concern can be found on pages 17 - 19.

It is the professional opinion of the Office of Operational Analysis that the Tax Assessor's Office is in good standing, functioning at an above satisfactory level. The department has sound leadership in place, and overall performance in delivering expected services is consistent, within budget, and abides by applicable law. Most concerns noted were minor, and only three findings were worthy of formal mention, along with recommendations to mitigate. Those issues included the following:

1. Ensure proper financial controls are in place if accepting application filings with payment
2. Implement appropriate staffing levels
3. Explore electronic transmission of notices

The recommendations outlined were made with the goal of worthy consideration and hopeful implementation for the betterment of ACCGov as a local government entity. Based on this audit and the analysis that was completed, the Office of Operational Analysis plans to follow up on the findings and recommendations within one year's time to assess the status in adherence toward completion.

The Office of Operational Analysis would like to offer and extend our sincere appreciation to the ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office and Board of Assessors for their assistance and cooperation throughout the audit process. Additionally, the Manager's Office has been responsive to any requests for information or clarification. Finally, gratitude is warranted for the support and direction provided by the Audit Committee in acknowledgement of their respective role.



Gavin J. Hassemer, Internal Auditor

Glossary of Terms

→ Office of Operational Analysis

For better understanding, the Office of Operational Analysis has compiled a list of commonly used words and phrases in relation to the Tax Assessor's Office audit that are used throughout this report.

Appeal: Action taken by property owner seeking a formal review of the official valuation assessment done by an appraiser in relation to the taxability, uniformity, valuation, or denial of a homestead exemption.

Board of Assessors (BOA): Board responsible for assessment of real and personal property values and granting homestead exemptions. Tax Assessor's Office governing body, which is comprised of three members. Members are appointed by the Mayor and Commission and are authorized by O.C.G.A § 48-5-290.

Board of Equalization (BOE): Established by OCGA § 48-5-311, board tasked with conducting certified appeals from property owners and determining their validity. Appointed by a grand jury, the Board of Equalization yields the power to request a reevaluation of property(s).

Digest Year (DY): Refers to the county's evaluation calendar year.

Fair Market Value (FMV): The amount a knowledgeable buyer would pay for a property and a willing seller would accept for the property in an arm's length, bona fide sale.

Field Visit: Refers to appraiser(s) visit to a property (real, commercial or personal) to assess value.

Fiscal Year (FY): 12-month period to which the annual operating budget applies. In Athens-Clarke County this is July 1 – June 30.

Official Code of Georgia (O.C.G.A.): The Official Code of Georgia Annotated is catalogue of all laws established throughout the state by the Georgia General Assembly.

Overview

Chapter One

On November 7, 2023 the Mayor and Commission approved the FY24 Audit Workplan for the Office of Operational Analysis (OA). The Tax Assessor's Office, along with Economic Development and Housing and Community Development Departments were recommended for periodic audits during the final three quarters of FY24. The purpose of periodic departmental audits is to conduct a basic review and analysis for established performance (operations) measures and sound financial management strategies to deliver exceptional service, while also ensuring compliance through internal controls.

It is the intent of the Internal Auditor, at the request of the Audit Committee, to assure that every department of ACCGov be reviewed by such a periodic audit regularly, on an established rotation. Because this is a new approach for the Office of Operational Analysis, it is necessary for the Audit Committee to use its discretion to recommend the scheduling of these periodic audits. Among the factors considered in the decision were length of time since previous internal audit, community and organizational impact, scheduling, and risk exposure.

In Georgia, county Tax Assessor offices are established by state law and therefore the assessment practices and creation of the annual tax digest are governed by the State Tax Commissioner. However, given the importance of its role in the greater community, the Audit Committee found it advisable to review the operation of the ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office and assure it has proper financial controls in place, and is performing efficiently and effectively, while in compliance with county and state regulatory laws. Additionally, the committee took into consideration the fact that the Tax Assessor's Office has not had an internal audit since Athens-Clarke County unification in 1991.

With respect to the tailored nature of this unique approach, staff sought to apply applicable aspects of the General Accounting Office's "Green Book" model of Internal Controls to the departmental functions being audited in general. Finally, any other pertinent observations or points of interest made by the Internal Auditor that may warrant future examination (inefficiency, ineffectiveness, customer dissatisfaction, staff vacancies, missing records, misspending, fraud, abuse, negligence, etc.) were noted as appropriate.

The audit scope comprised three sections of review and analysis:

Financial

Items evaluated regarding appropriate internal controls and oversight included fiscal year budget and spending, as well as oversight and permissions. Additionally, the handling of purchasing, travel, contracts, receipt of goods, and accounting of assets was subject to examination. Timesheet entry and payroll processing were also included as part of financial review and analysis.

Performance

The review of service delivery was based on the mission statement and objectives of the department and included benchmark testing against self-stated performance measures, review of standard operating procedures and analysis of staffing and succession planning.

Compliance

All applicable items of compliance were subject to review including adherence to charter and ordinances, proper professional credentials, analyses by third-party audits and reviews, alignment with organizational strategic plan and initiatives, as well as overall adherence to existing policies/procedures/practices.

Process

During the planning phase all involved parties are notified and an initial entrance meeting is held to establish the audit timeline, as well as discuss the scope and audit objectives. During this phase information will also be gathered through research, questionnaires and documents submitted by the department being audited. Dates for field visits and in-person interviews are agreed upon.

The fieldwork phase of the audit includes on-site visits so that OA can observe department operations, interview staff, perform analyses, identify anomalies and write recommendations for improvement. At the conclusion of this phase an exit interview is scheduled to review the audit findings with the department director.

The third phase of the audit is reporting. OA staff prepares a draft report, to which the department director prepares a written response and corrective action plan. These documents are combined, along with a management response, as applicable, into a final report which is presented to the Audit Committee for recommendation, and Mayor & Commission for approval.

Figure 1



Methodology

To assure objectivity, independence, integrity and professionalism, OA uses generally accepted government auditing standards to gather and analyze data. Information used for this report was attained directly from the Tax Assessor's Office itself and other ACCGov entities, along with publicly available documents and information. Sources outside of ACCGov are cited where applicable. Specific activities of research and analysis included:

- Research of federal, state and local laws along with regulations governing the operation of the Tax Assessor's Office
- Gathering of information specific to the ACC Board of Assessors and Tax Assessor's Office through research of digital and printed sources
- Analysis of documentation requested from the department and subsequently submitted by department director and staff
- Data and information gathered from written surveys prepared by OA staff and submitted by each employee of the subject department
- Oral interviews of all members of Board of Assessors, chief appraiser and all staff members
- Observation of office performance by shadowing staff during normal operations
- Analysis of assessment practices in the field during property visit ride-along

While methodology and scope are designed to be consistent among ACCGov departments, the diversity of operations across the organization calls for certain aspects of the audit work to be tailored to each department. For the Tax Assessor's Office, a standardized Periodic Document Request List was used, and all requested material was submitted by the department in a timely manner. Three versions of questionnaires were developed—one for the chief appraiser, one for the supervisors, and one for staff—with a 100% response rate. Fieldwork comprised approximately 35 hours over 6 days, including office visits, interviews, and one ride-along with appraisers to various sites. Email and phone calls were used as a means of follow-up for scheduling office visits, and quick clarification questions. Confirmation of assets, records, statements and documents was made by visual inspection and cross-referenced with information from other ACCGov departments, as well as local and state public records.

Background

Taxes on real and personal property are levied across the country, although the methods of taxation and use of funds vary by state. In Georgia, the State Tax Commissioner oversees the governance of local tax assessors. Upon city/county unification in 1991 the Athens-Clarke County Board of Assessors came into being as it is currently structured, with its mission to:

“Appraise all property located in Athens-Clarke County at its fair market value to ensure that taxpayers pay no more than their fair share of property taxes. Achieve fair and equitable valuations of all properties within state mandated specifications. Produce a statutorily acceptable digest by August 1 of each year.”



Figure 2 - Entrance to Tax Assessor's Office within the ACCGov Courthouse as of December 2023

The ultimate authority and responsibility for the Tax Assessor's Office lies with Board of Assessors. The board is responsible for appointing the chief appraiser, who serves as director of the Tax Assessor's Office. The board is also responsible for approving the tax digest, as well as any special use exemptions.

The Board of Assessors has three members, who are appointed to six-year terms by the Mayor & Commission and are compensated approximately \$330 per month for time spent in regular monthly meetings, special called sessions, and required training. Current members' terms expire on Dec. 31 of years 2024, 2026 and 2027.

The Board of Assessors, chief appraiser and staff work toward objectives which they have set to exceed state requirements. These quantifiable measures assure property is assessed uniformly across the state, and that property owners are notified of assessments in a timely manner.

During Digest Year (DY) 2023, the Assessor's Office appraised 42,445 parcels of real estate, 5,945 business personal property accounts, and 2,467 manufactured homes within Athens-Clarke County, including property within the jurisdictions of Bogart and Winterville that lie within the county. The responsibilities of the office, in addition to assessments, include processing returns, notifying property owners, handling exemption requests, updating digital and physical property records, answering customer inquiries, and maintaining appropriate credentials. Furthermore, because property owners have the right to appeal their property assessments, the chief appraiser and staff must be available for appeal proceedings, which are arranged by the Clerk of Superior Court. State law provides that appeals may be decided in one of three ways, any of which can include hearings for which representatives of the Assessor's Office must appear. Additionally, the result of any of these appeals can lead to further appeal to the Superior Court.

The Tax Assessor's valuations are reviewed annually by the Georgia Department of Audits in its State Ratio Study. Every three years the Georgia Department of Revenue conducts an audit of the office's policies and procedures, valuation methods, and digest compliance. These external audits are then sent to the following Athens-Clarke County parties: Tax Assessor, Tax Commissioner, Mayor & Commission, and Board of Education.

Analysis

Chapter Two

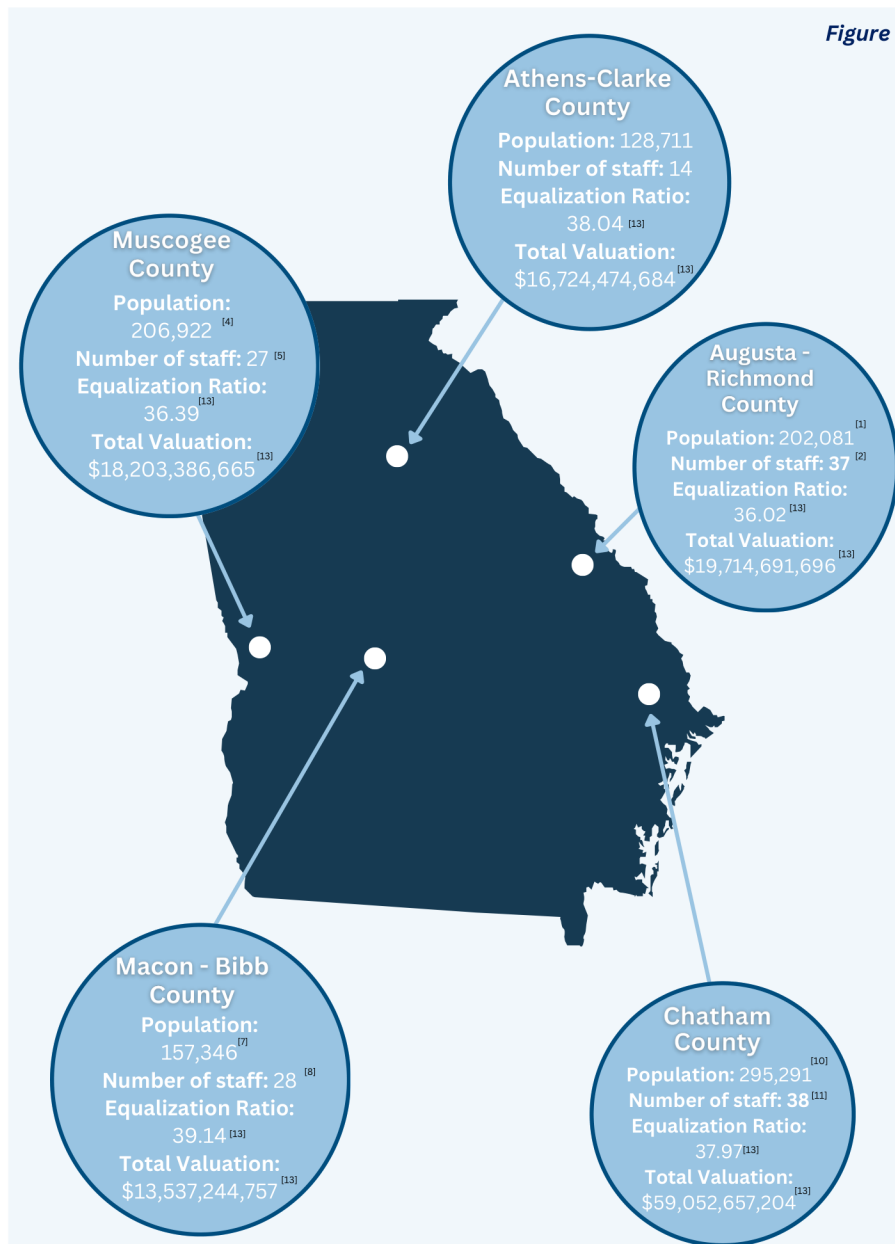
Throughout the periodic audit, OA staff analyzed data from four comparable tax assessors' offices in the state. Financing, staffing levels, use of digital resources, customer service and compliance were reviewed. From these inquiries and findings, Operational Analysis staff were successfully able to compare the ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office with those similar state offices.

Comparative Analysis

Due to tax assessment practices being regulated by state government, counties themselves have no jurisdiction regarding the actual product the assessor's office is charged with delivering, i.e., a fair and equitable tax digest which appropriately reflects property values. However, because each county provides the infrastructure within which its office operates (personnel, supplies and equipment, office space, etc.) there is latitude in the degree of support that a county can provide an assessor's office. Furthermore, because the work of the Board of Assessors and Tax Assessor's Office directly involves interaction with the public on a regular basis, the assessment process can have a significant impact on public perception of a county's overall professionalism and transparency.

The Georgia Department of Audits is required to produce an annual 100% Statewide Equalized Adjusted Property Tax Digest (OCGA 48-5-274), which is reported accordingly to the state's 185 school districts. In the most current available report (2022), Clarke County was the 21st largest digest by total assessed dollar amount at \$16.7B, with the largest being Gwinnett at \$146.2B and the smallest being the Newton County portion of Social Circle at \$4.1M. Clarke County's sales assessment ratio was 38.04 with the state median being 36.04 and state average 36.6. The highest ratio was Gainesville at 88.7 and lowest was Barrien County at 26.83.

Figure 3



[1] U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Augusta-richmond county consolidated ... (n.d.). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/augustarichmondcountyconsolidatedgovernmentbalancegeorgia/POP010220>

[2] Board of Tax Assessors, Staff Directory • Augusta • CivicEngage. (n.d.). <https://www.augustaga.gov/Directory.aspx?DID=68>

[3] Augusta, Georgia adopted budget preliminary version fiscal year 2023 ... (n.d.-a). <https://www.augustaga.gov/DocumentCenter/View/16996/2023-Adopted-Budget---Preliminary-Version>

[4] U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Muscogee County, Georgia. (n.d.-c). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/muscogeecountygeorgia/PST045222>

[5] Office of the tax assessor. (n.d.). <https://www.columbusga.gov/TaxAssessors/>

[6] Government, C. C. (n.d.). Financial planning. Columbus Consolidated Government. <https://www.columbusga.gov/Finance/pdfs/budget-book-FY23.pdf>

[7] U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Macon-Bibb County, Georgia; United States. (n.d.-c). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/maconbibbcountygeorgia/US/PST045222>

[8] About Us. Macon-Bibb County Board Of Tax Assessors. (n.d.). <https://www.bibbassessors.com/about-us/>

[9] Macon-Bibb County proposed budget. (n.d.-b). <https://www.maconbibb.us/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Budget-Ac-FY23-12-22-Final.pdf>

[10] U.S. Census Bureau quickfacts: Chatham County, Georgia. (n.d.-e). <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/chathamcountygeorgia/PST045222>

[11] <https://cccdn.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/Files/BoardofAssessors/2022AnnualReport.pdf>

[12] Chatham County. (n.d.-b). <https://cccdn.blob.core.windows.net/cdn/Files/ChathamCounty/Finance/Adopted%20Budgets/2021-2022FY2022Adopted%20Budgets%20Book%20download.pdf>

[13] <https://www.audits.ga.gov/ReportSearch/download/30347>

Given the size of the state of Georgia, and the diversity of its geographic, demographic and economic features, quantitative comparisons can be limited and/or highly complex. Additionally, because unified governments are a small minority insofar as local government structure, OA used a sample comprising three unified governments and one county government within the state for comparison, focusing on qualitative comparison of performance and transparency.

Aspects examined were availability of information on the internet, availability of online resources for filing forms, and telephone customer service (see Appendix D). Among these factors, it is the professional judgement of OA that the ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office rates as average regarding the availability of information on the internet and resources for filing forms, while it is well above average regarding customer service, particularly the promptness, professionalism and courtesy of staff in answering telephone inquiries.

Financial Review

A review of the FY24 Operating Budget, and previous three fiscal years, was performed to gain a general sense of revenue/expenditure trends, and provide detail of major account spending. This was accomplished through an understanding of financial documents, interviews, observations, and data analysis. Year-over-year approved budget totals are compared against end-of-year results in the summary table below. Overall, the annual operating budget has slightly increased over the past four fiscal years, as indicated by percentage below (see Fig. 4).

Figure 4 - Financial Highlights: Tax Assessor's Office

Fiscal Year	Approved Budget	% +/- Previous Year	Year End Expenditures	% of Yearly Expenditures	Notes
FY21	\$1,111,580	---	\$1,013,585.54	91.2	--
FY22	\$1,124,680	1.2	\$1,021,985.36	90.9	--
FY23	\$1,124,847	<1	\$1,137,886.57	99.31	--
FY24*	\$1,226,520	<1	\$552,501	44.32	FY24 Budget Revised**

*Year-to-Date expenditures (1st & 2nd Qtr.)

**FY24 Approved Budget was revised by \$20,000, increasing total approved budget to \$1,246,520

As is typical with most general fund departmental budgets, compensation and benefit line items total the majority of the Tax Assessor's Office expenditures, though a few operating accounts are worth mention based on allocated amounts.

- Professional Services [FY24 / \$43,251.00]:

This account is used primarily to pay for annual software service contracts, including qPublic and WinGAP. Actual consultants in the traditional sense are not typically used.

- Services – Postage [FY24 / \$18,354.00]:

This account is used to pay for mass mailings of required tax notices to all real and personal property holders throughout Athens-Clarke County. Per State law, notices must be mailed, with some exception.

- Services – Printing [FY24 / \$7,374.00]:

This account is used in conjunction with postage expenses to print required tax notices for all real and personal property holders throughout Athens-Clarke County. Per state law, notices must be mailed, with some exception.

Thus far into FY24 (44.32% usage at time of analysis), both the Travel & Lodging and Books & Subscriptions account lines were over budget at 140% and 131% of allocated funds, respectively. This, however, is not entirely unusual given a majority of annual staff training could have taken place simultaneously, in bulk, within the first half of the fiscal year, as opposed to being charged throughout the year. Furthermore, based on previous fiscal year close-out accounting for the department, these overages will likely be evened out by unused surplus dollars in other account lines.



Figure 5 - Side angle of verified vehicle that is used by Assessor's when conducting field visits.

The Tax Assessor's Office has not applied for or been awarded any grants that would impact revenue reporting. Additionally, there have been no capital projects over recent years. Associated assets (vehicles, information technology) were verified in the field by Operational Analysis staff, and compared against known lists of resources.

A review of the annual expenditures did not yield any formal contracts observed by, or known of the Tax Assessor's Office that would be held with specific vendors for services obtained, such as software.

Instead, these interactions act more as membership dues, and can be terminated at any time. When necessary or advantageous, the office works with the purchasing division of the Finance Department to procure items over the \$2,500 threshold, whether by multiple quotes or request for proposals (RFP).

In accordance with ACCGov Finance Department policy, all staff are designated by departmental leadership for various permissions within the Munis financial system. Upon review, the list of current permissions amongst Tax Assessor staff appear accurate and appropriate given the level of access select employees have been designated, based on job title and responsibility. This also holds true for purchase card authority, in terms of reconciliation and approval of charges. A list of active purchase cards was verified between the purchasing division of the Finance Department and the Tax Assessor's Office. Overall, permissions are considered appropriate in the context of budget analysis, procurement, journal entry, fund transfers, reimbursements, receipt of goods, and cash handling.

Like many departments, compensation represents the largest annual expenditure within the Tax Assessor's budget, specifically \$789,011 allocated to full-time salaries, or 63% of the total departmental budget in FY24. Staff within the department are expected to provide both a detailed paper timesheet to their supervisor, and separately log hours into the Munis ESS software system for final approval. Although this two-factor method of validation is not required by Human Resources policy, it represents a valid practice within the department to ensure accuracy and proper recordkeeping. Upon financial review, Operational Analysis staff did not observe any abnormalities in the sampling of timesheets, or



Figure 6 - One of the vehicles verified by OA staff that is used by Assessor's when conducting field visits.

concern over practices in the validation of actual time worked. It should be noted that remote work (telework) is not a regular option for Tax Assessor staff, so no further analysis related to that practice was conducted.

Performance Review

The Tax Assessor's objective can be best described in its succinct, self-stated mission.

“*The Tax Assessor's Office is responsible for the appraisal of all property located in Athens-Clarke County at its fair market value.*”
as stated in the FY23 Comprehensive Budget

Fulfilling this mission involves providing services and programs which assure the office not only appraises property fairly, but also allows the information gathered to be shared with property owners, other interested parties, and state and local government entities.

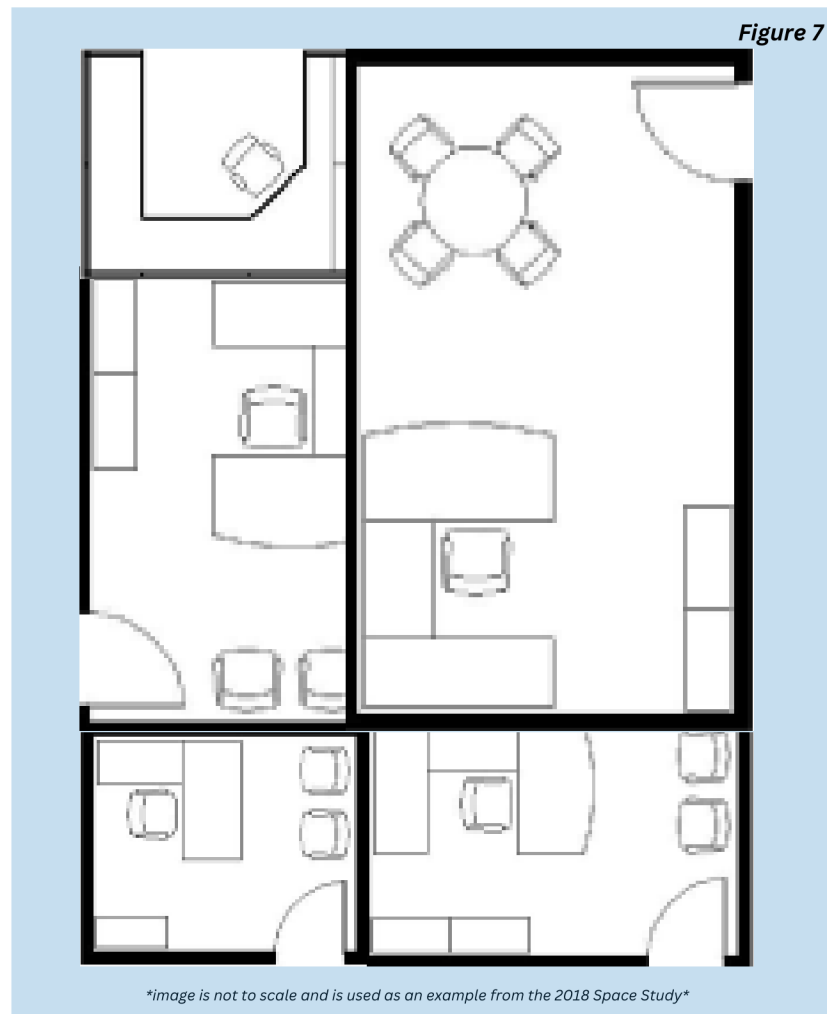
A Periodic Audit was conducted of the ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office from Nov. 2023-Jan. 2024. During this time Operational Analysis staff reviewed various sources of information and data in order to analyze the performance of the office. Overall, OA found the operations to be at or above organizational standards. Additional notes and recommendations for performance improvement can be found in the Findings & Recommendations section of this report.

Physical Facility

The Office of the Tax Assessor is located on the second floor of the Athens-Clarke County courthouse, adjacent to the Tax Commissioner's Office and two floors below the Clerk of Superior Court's Office. Proximity to both of the aforementioned offices, as well as the courtrooms for Superior Court, tend to facilitate efficiency given the amount of information and paperwork that is shared among the three offices. Visitors are subject to screening upon entry to the courthouse. The Tax Assessor has its own office suite, with one public entry and one staff-only entrance.

Daily foot traffic is estimated to be 10 to 15 people except during appeal season when this number can increase substantially. The Tax Assessor's Office requires 14 parking spaces for staff and 5-10 spaces for visitors that can be shared with other departments. It also requires space for parking four county vehicles.

Based upon the 2018 ACCGov Space Allocation Study, it was calculated that by 2023 the Tax Assessor's Office would require a total assignable area of 4,006 sq. ft. to accommodate an estimated 14 staff members and 4,156 sq. ft. by 2028 to accommodate an estimated 15 staff members, increasing deficiency of space. The current total assignable area for the entire Tax Assessor's Office is 2,987 sq. ft., which is unchanged from the 2018 Space Allocation Program despite an increase in staffing levels.



Staffing

At close of the periodic audit, the Tax Assessor's Office was fully staffed with 14 employees, as indicated on the organizational chart. At the start of the audit, and throughout the fieldwork phase, there were 13 staff and one vacancy. The 14th position was approved in the FY23 budget, but the position was not filled until the third quarter of FY24. The breakdown of staff by position includes the chief appraiser, three supervisors (personal property, real property and IT), six real property appraisers, one personal property appraiser, two support staff and one appraiser who reports to the IT supervisor.

The audit found that most employees are cross-trained to perform various duties as volume of work increases or decreases in given areas, but the normal breakdown of divisions is Real Property, Personal Property and IT/Support Staff. Real Property is further divided into commercial and residential property. All supervisors perform appraisal duties in addition to their supervisory functions.

Real Property Appraisal

The largest workload and most high-profile activity for the Tax Assessor's Office is real property appraisal, which can be broken down roughly into four annual steps: assess value, notify owner, answer inquiries and resolve appeals. Because property values are ever-changing due to market conditions, modifications to the property itself, and factors influencing neighborhoods, steps in the assessment are handled year round by staff. Among the activities involved in valuation are receiving information from other departments including the Clerk of Superior Court (deed information), Building Permits & Inspections Department (permits for improvements), Planning Department (plats), and Tax Commissioner (homestead and other exemption applications).

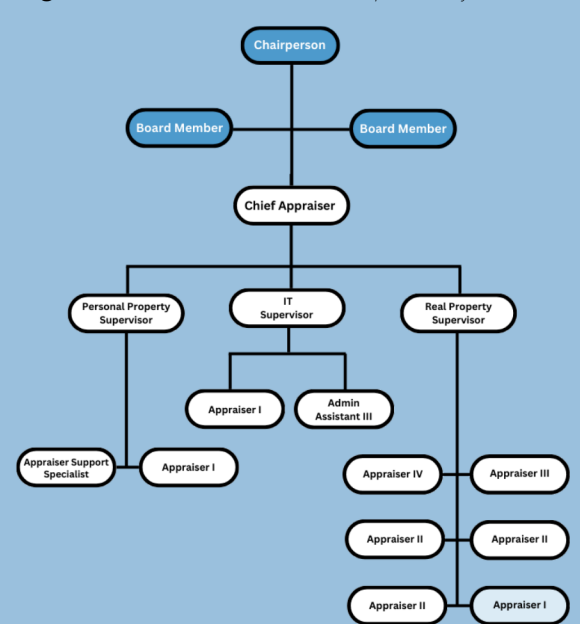
OA observed that all staff work cooperatively to assure information is properly handled and entered into two main software programs. Information is entered manually into WinGAP software, which generates the information publicly available on the qPublic website. Due to the nature of the legal documents from the Clerk of Superior Courts Office, as well as applications for exemptions, manual entry is the only way to update records in the WinGAP software. Updates involving records from the Planning Department are also entered manually, although the Planning Department uses workflow management software (Clariti), to which only the IT Supervisor in the Assessor's Office has access.

For appraisal purposes, real property is divided into approximately 550 residential neighborhoods and 100 commercial neighborhoods among six real property appraisers in addition to the supervisor, who primarily handles commercial property appraisals.

Field visits take place year round in order to confirm value on Jan. 1st of each year, which is the valuation day for assessors. The procedure is for assessors to always go out in pairs in a marked ACCGov vehicle. The presence of two appraisers during site visits heightens safety, enhances accuracy, and creates efficiencies. Identifying properties, measuring structures, notetaking and assessing the condition of construction are all enhanced with the presence of two appraisers. During a field ride-along, appraisers were observed examining seven properties in approximately 1.75 hours.

Upon site visits, assessors assure that they park so that the identifying information of the vehicle can be viewed from the front door of the property. Appraisers knock and identify themselves and pass along business cards to the owner, if on site. Otherwise, a door tag is left on the front door to inform the owner of the visit. Visual inspection is made of the property to

Figure 8



The following diagram is an updated organization chart created by OA staff to include the newly filled position within the Tax Assessor's Office.

assess percentage completion for new construction, or to assure work is compliant with any permits filed. Appraisers measure structures using a physical tape measure, and generally take notes and record findings using paper and pen, although tablets with dedicated software are available for field use. Office tasks in follow up to field visits include updating records and, if necessary, notifying the Building Permits and Inspections Department or Planning Department of findings.

In DY23 there were

42,445

real property
parcels within
Athens-Clarke
County



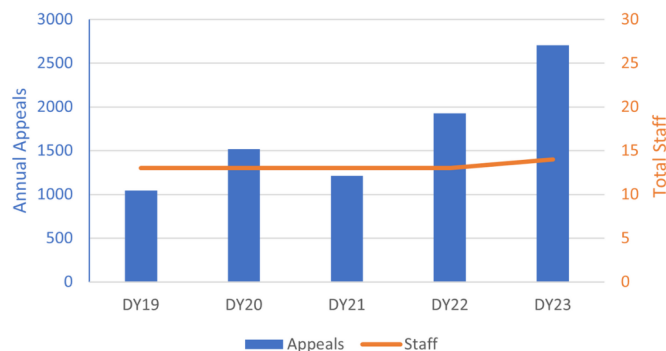
Figure 9

Activities necessary to create a digest for real property between Jan. 1, when books are opened, through April 1, when books are closed, include processing returns and special use applications; reviewing conservation use, historic properties, and exempt parcels; sales reviews; neighborhood ratio studies; and data transfer with the Tax Commissioner. By the end of April, the digest is completed and presented to the Board of Assessors for initial approval, with final approval occurring in July for submission to the State Tax Commissioner by Aug. 1st.

Once the books are closed for the current year digest, the process of notifying property owners of assessment begins, and must be completed per state law by July 1st. By the end of April, files are sent to a third-party vendor which prints and mails notices to property owners. Support staff is charged with handling returned mail and appeals, estimated to be a few hundred pieces of mail during peak season. The administrative assistant retrieves mail twice per day from the mailroom and proceeds to record and process returned mail. Steps include re-mailing returned items with forwarding address, verifying returned mail in WinGAP software, obtaining the probate judge's signature for notice of undelivered mail, and coordinating with Sheriff's Department to post a notification of undelivered mail. Support staff handles change of address requests year round. Other activities in the notification process include fielding telephone, email, and walk-in inquiries, and mailing exemption denial letters.

Upon notification, many property owners inquire about their property assessment and ultimately may file appeals, with 2,707 appeals filed in 2023. Appeal hearings are often averted by staff as they answer inquiries and review appeal requests. Occasionally, corrections to property records, and subsequently the property value, are made upon verification by the appraiser of information obtained from the property owner. Furthermore, the chief appraiser may arrange a meeting to settle on an appraisal value. If the appeal goes before the Board of Equalization or hearings officer, appraisers must be available to appear in proceedings. Once appeals are decided, the Tax Assessor's Office must process coinciding documents and update WinGAP software.

Figure 10 5-Year Staff to Appeals Ratio

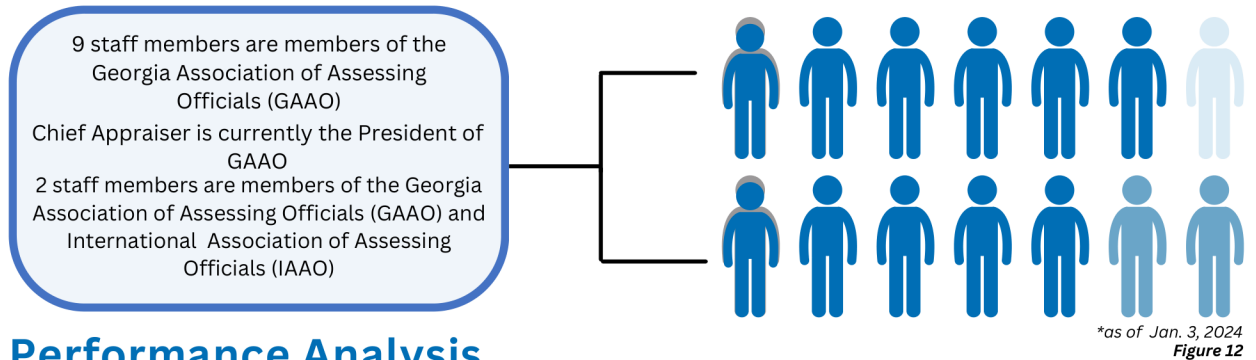


Personal Property Appraisal

The assessment of personal property includes approximately 5,900 personal and business property accounts, or about 8.5% of the total number of appraisals. However, given the fluid nature of personal property assets, the work of personal property appraisal requires an intensive level of investigation and administrative work in order to assure all taxable property is identified, and correct owner information is maintained.

As with real property, the assessment process requires year round information gathering, along with manual processing of forms and data entry. Fieldwork takes place during October and November to identify new personal property accounts. Data for returns is input by mid-December so that returns can be mailed by a third-party vendor at the beginning of January. By February returns come into the office and are manually sorted so that records can be updated. In addition to returns, personal property staff also processes Freeport Exemptions, which allow certain manufacturers to exempt 100% of their inventory from property taxes under certain conditions.

During office field visits, the personal property supervisor and staff were observed handling their workload effectively, using various methods of research including internet sources, business license applications, and their own general knowledge of the county to assure the most accurate information possible. Inquiries from property owners and the general public are handled promptly, courteously and professionally.



Performance Analysis

Performance review of the Tax Assessor's office yielded the following points of significance:

GENERAL TAX ASSESSOR'S OFFICE INFORMATION*



325 E Washington St.
Suite 280
Athens, GA 30601



Phone: 706-613-3140
Fax: 706-613-3146



General Office Email:
taxassessor@accgov.com



Web Address:
accgov.com/taxassessor



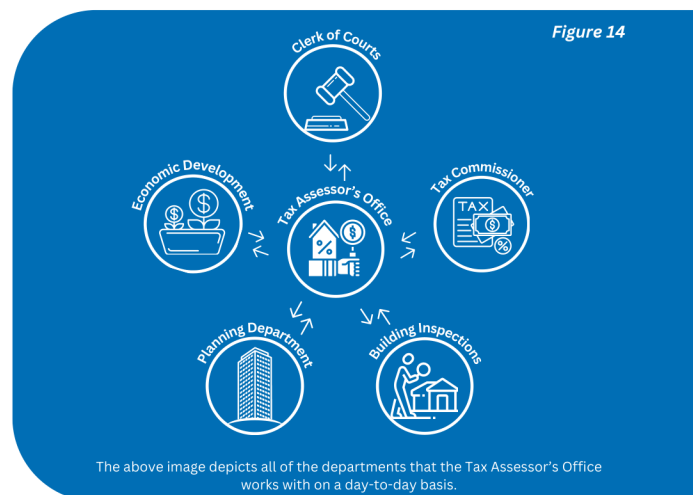
Hours of Operation:
Monday - Friday,
8:00 AM - 5:00 PM

*as verified by OA Staff

Figure 13

- Communication between supervisors and staff, and among all employees in general is abundantly evident. Staff are aware of expectations and are cross-trained to adapt to shifting workloads.
- The staffing level, although adequate, may not be sustainable given the growth of the property digest, changing ownership, and volatility of the real estate market.
- Succession planning, both on the Board of Assessors and Tax Assessor's staff, does not appear to be proactively addressed.
- The volume of physical mail and other paperwork handled manually is significant and unlikely to decrease, potentially causing facility space issues and need for additional staff.
- Manual entry of information, both in the Tax Assessor's Office and among the other departments with which it regularly interacts, contributes to the significant workload of the office.
- There is not a dedicated GIS staff member, although at the moment the Personal Property Appraiser II position handles a great deal of this work.
- The policy of answering telephones personally rather than by automated system is time consuming, but seems to ultimately help resolve customer issues efficiently and effectively.
- The office maintains satisfactory compliance with state law at its current level of staffing, but there is a disparity in the experience level of staff, with 35% of employees having eight or more years within the department, and 65% having less than five years.

Within the timeframe that the periodic audit took place, it was noted that, with the approval of six Tax Allocation Districts (TADs), the chief appraiser and staff have had an additional workload in providing information to the Economic Development Department and other entities as redevelopment moves forward. Because these plans are set forth to span a 20-year timeline, and involve not only ACCGov but also the Clarke County School District among other public and private entities, it is difficult to predict the scope of work the Tax Assessor's Office will be asked to contribute going forward.

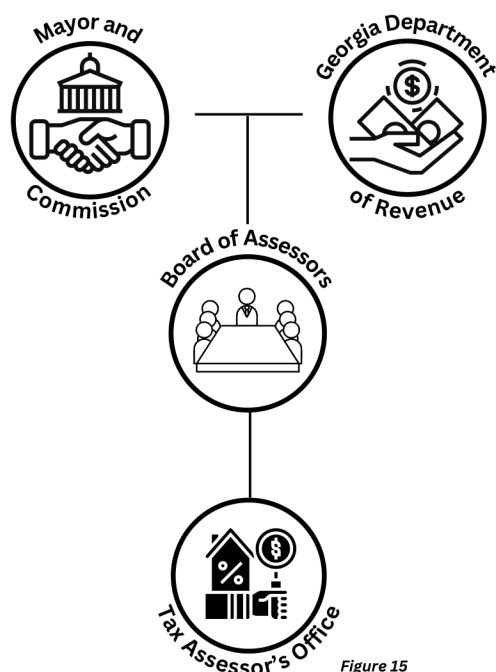


Compliance Review

Activities of the Tax Assessor's Office culminate in the portion of its mission to "produce a statutorily acceptable digest by August 1st of each year." State law dictates certain activities and deadlines in order to meet this goal. In achieving compliance, the office must also work within the charter and regulations of the county in which it operates, as well as adhere to professional standards and federal law, if and when applicable.

In order to comply with state law in producing the tax digest, filing appropriate documents, and notifying taxpayers, the office works under at least fifteen state-imposed deadlines annually. The office uses WinGAP software, which is the standard used by 145 of Georgia's 159 counties for mass appraisal, digital property record cards, exporting information for assessment notices, and to update the public-facing qPublic software.

The ACCGov Tax Assessor's Office has met or exceeded state guidelines, both for timeliness and accuracy of its appraisal digest for Digest Years (DY) 2016-2022, with the exception of minor anomalies in DY20 due to adjustments in deadlines caused by the governor's COVID-19 state of emergency declarations.



The state requires certain notifications to taxpayers and property owners. Analysis of compliance was conducted through research, field visits, and interviews with staff. Evidence showed that all such notices are being handled in the manner prescribed by the state. Examples include the inclusion of the State Tax Commissioner's "Important Tax Information" pamphlet in assessment mailings, notification of site visits via announcement on the public website, and notice of returned mail being posted at the courthouse in conjunction with the probate judge and the Sheriff's Office.

Though mandated by the state, the Board of Assessors is appointed by the local Mayor & Commission, and governs itself through the election of a chair and secretary. OA staff reviewed documents, interviewed board members, and observed that the board operates according to charter guidelines and meets all state standards.

The Tax Assessor's role within the larger organization of ACCGov can be described as something of a partnership arrangement, given that the Tax Assessor is established by the state but operates within the infrastructure of the county.

The Georgia Department of Revenue, Local Government Services Division, conducts a formal review of the Clarke County Digest every three years, the most recent having been completed in 2022. Overall, the report found the Tax Assessor's Office to be in compliance with applicable state laws, making several statements that indicate exceptional service and expertise surrounding assessments. The next review is scheduled for 2025.

“Based on the information provided from the County, it appears that the county makes every reasonable effort to arrive at an appropriate value as opposed to an overstated value of the property^[1]”
-Dept. of Revenue Employee

Review by OA staff identified three topics of concern by the Department of Revenue; however, the DOR-assigned Compliance Specialist who authored the report also makes clear that such observations are in fact following acceptable procedure per applicable O.C.G.A. sections.

Regarding field reviews, the report notes that the Tax Assessor's Office is physically reviewing property throughout the county on a three-year cycle, and adhering to standard appraisal practices.^[2] An example cited is the office's efforts to schedule appointments with owners when access to the property is warranted for accuracy in the appraisal.^[3] This level of engagement was also noted for general public relations and information campaigns, such as meeting with neighborhood groups, as appropriate, to inform of impending reappraisals or value updates.^[4]

The Board of Assessors was also within the scope of the review, and was found by the DOR to be both qualified and certified to vote and act in all matters related to the 2022 reappraisals.^[5] For any of the various appeal methods (Board of Equalization, arbitrator, hearing officer, or Superior Court), the Board of Assessors adhered to applicable regulations by ultimately applying the valuation determined by these alternative methods, as formally recommended.^[7] Additionally, the chief appraiser was cited for implementation of measures that promote efficiency and effectiveness of associated staff within the department, as required by O.C.G.A. 48-5-264(a)(3).^[6]

With regard to staff, it was observed by OA that the Tax Assessor's Office adheres to all federal and state employment laws. Appraisers hold proper education and credentials, and support staff is appropriately trained (*refer to table of staff education and years of service below*).

Figure 16 - Compliance Highlights: Tax Assessor's Office

Job Title	Number of Positions	Minimum Education (per job description)	Minimum Years (per job description)	Total Years in Department (avg. if more than one position)
Chief Appraiser	1	Bachelor's Degree	5	24
IT Supervisor	1	Bachelor's Degree	4	8
Personal Property Supervisor	1	Bachelor's Degree	3	3
Real Property Supervisor	1	Bachelor's Degree	6	13
Administrative Assistant	1	High School Diploma or Equivalent	3	7.75
Appraiser Support Specialist	1	High School Diploma or Equivalent	1	2.5
Appraiser I	3	High School Diploma or Equivalent	1	1.67
Appraiser II	3	High School Diploma or Equivalent	2	2.5
Appraiser III	1	High School Diploma or Equivalent	4	1.5
Appraiser IV	1	Bachelor's Degree	6	17

[1] 2022 Clarke County Digest Review, Georgia Dept. of Revenue, Local Government Services Division, p.4
[2] Ibid., p. 2
[3] Ibid., p. 3
[4] Ibid., p. 6
[5] Ibid., p. 7
[6] Ibid., p. 7
[7] Ibid., p. 11

Compliance Analysis

Compliance review of the Tax Assessor's office yielded the following points of significance:

- Standard operating procedure documentation is adequate at present; however, a definitive system of organizing and updating materials was not observed. For the purpose of continuity and succession planning materials should be easily available for reference.
- The Tax Assessor's Office seemed to indicate that a strategic plan to meet certain goals of the *Mayor & Commission's Strategic Plan Goals, Strategies, and Initiatives* could be viewed as influential to what they do and impact the impartiality they strive to maintain in assessments.

Internal Controls Review

The control environment is primarily limited to the physical office space of the Tax Assessor, though appraisers frequently use government issued vehicles daily to conduct routine inspections. The office itself is located within the county courthouse, which by function, acts as one of the more secured buildings for ACCGov. Although customer interaction is welcomed and can occur on site, it is kept within the confines of a small lobby that has controlled access into the employees-only section of the space.

In assessing the potential risks that could exist within such an environment, none of unusual nature stood out from those that would inherently occur amongst administrative operations, staffing and financial interactions. Examples include the potential onboarding of new staff or those who maybe transitioning out of a role. It should also be noted who has access and permissions to accounting software and the ability to make transactions. Information Technology plays an important part in routine data collection and analysis, but paper files still exist and some have been identified as the only copy of recorded information, until digitized in the future.

Upon review of the permissions identified for application in the Munis financial system, general internal controls have been applied, and appear active in practice. The Tax Assessor's Office does not accept or disburse payment as part of its departmental functions, which alone helps ensure secure financial management control. Almost all office purchases are made via a few purchase cards, which are held in confidence by the administrative assistant, supervisors, and/or chief appraiser. All other staff have been issued cards related to occasional travel, but those are also in the possession of the administrative assistant unless actively being used.



Figure 17 - Lobby area of Tax Assessor's Office. This portion of the office is open to the public for when there are any questions or concerns.

An exception was noticed during fieldwork that raised concern over proper control activity, specifically related to another department's fee collection. This was flagged as a potential weakness in the system, and additional details are mentioned in the Findings & Recommendations section of this report on page 17. To that end, segregation of financial duties should be maintained with little to no exception. For the vast majority of applicable transactions, the Tax Assessor's staff follows these guidelines.

To account for continuous operations and delivery of services, the various staff, including appraisers, are cross-trained in multiple specialties (e.g. appraisers can calculate both personal and real property values, even though each is primarily assigned to one or the other), thus deterring the potential for any absences to halt daily routines and productivity.

The computer assisted mass appraisal (CAMA) system used by the Tax Assessor's Office is WinGAP, which aids in the determination of property valuation. The ACCGov IT Department provides system backup initiatives every 24 hours.

The overall amount of information possessed by the Tax Assessor's Office is vast, considering the sheer volume of parcels and personal property holdings within the county. That being said, records are made available in good faith and in a manner that appears expeditious.

The majority of forms/documents posted upon the Tax Assessor's webpage are mandated by state law, and in a format typically dictated by the same. External communications, or those targeted to and from customers, can occur via phone, fax, email, or in person. Most official notification is performed by traditional mail. This can pose a slight risk in terms of successful delivery, but staff do track returned letters. Within the Tax Assessor's Office, internal communication is thorough, with no significant discrepancies to report. Although a continuous work-in-progress, the department has done well to document standard operating procedures (SOPs) of tasks, in particular for computing values within applicable software programs.

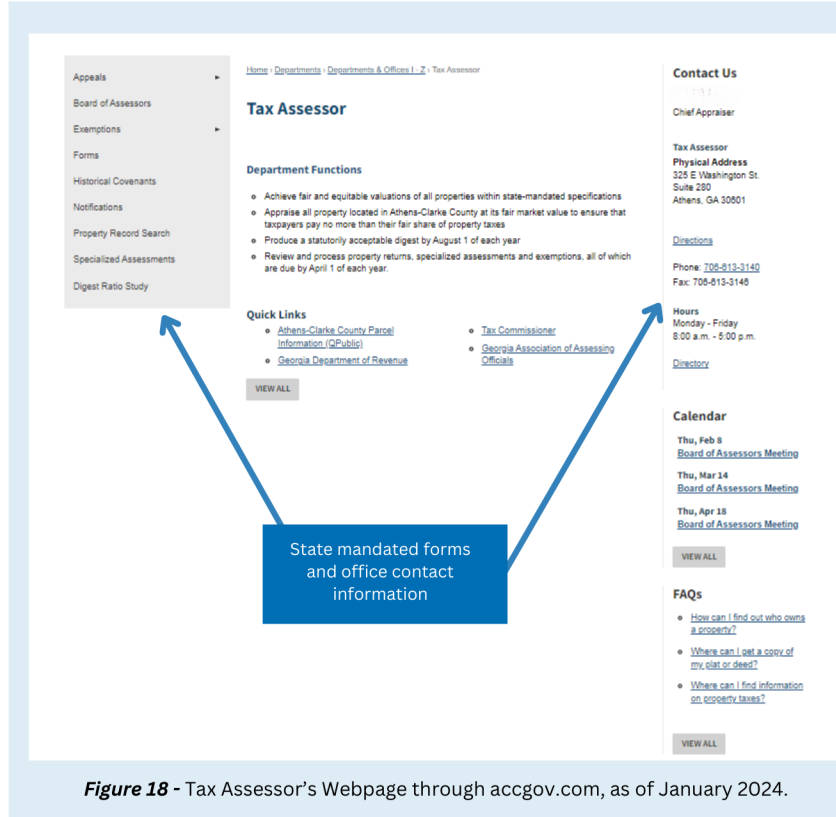


Figure 18 - Tax Assessor's Webpage through accgov.com, as of January 2024.

The business of tax assessment naturally lends itself to constant monitoring, whether it be from a processing schedule or calculated value standpoint. Thus, internal control for accuracy is measured annually with the digest, or intermittently via appeal. Fieldwork is often performed in association with an application or permit, and the staff strive to go in pairs.

Findings & Recommendations

Chapter Three

After careful research and analysis of the objectives, as through consideration of the defined scope, the Office of Operational Analysis believes there are three findings of significant note that should be addressed in reasonable time. The issues observed are described and accompanied by a potential recommendation to resolve. Subsequently, any response to the findings and recommendation is listed, as provided by the department head and/or county management.



Finding One

Ensure Proper Financial Controls Are in Place if Accepting Applications Filing with Payment



Observation

Payment (cash or check) received for Conservation Use Program application fees is occasionally accepted without thorough documentation and proper safe-keeping. These fees are associated with recording an approved application at the Clerk of Superior Court's Office, but are requested with the application when it is received by the Tax Assessor's Office, whether in person or by mail.

To clarify: The application is first submitted to, and reviewed by, the Tax Assessor's Office. If approved, the applicant is notified of the need to record the filing with the Clerk of Superior Court's Office and pay the applicable fee. On occasion, either cash or check is included with the original application when submitted to the Tax Assessor's Office.

In an effort to provide prompt customer service, office staff will often take those payments directly to the Clerk of Superior Court's Office (located in same building) on behalf of the applicant, so as not to provide an unnecessary burden upon the customer. At times though, it is not conducive for staff to make such a delivery immediately, and those fees are kept until a more opportune time is available. Specifically, said forms of payment are placed within a working folder, often with the application itself, and stored in the office of the staff member who provided intake. Thus, the risk to proper accounting, receipt protocol, and the potential for misplacement are elevated.



Recommendation

In accordance with proper ACCGov accounting procedures, as well as best practices for internal controls per the Standards of Internal Controls in the Federal Government (a.k.a. Green Book), the acceptance of payment meant for another ACCGov department should be promptly reconciled to avoid potential confusion, misplacement of funds, or the threat of theft. If immediate attention cannot be given to performing this procedure daily, then standard protocol for acceptance of fees should be ensured, such as customer receipts that are logged accordingly, while payment is kept in a secured location. The same person should not be responsible for all steps in this process, such as recording receipt and also processing the transaction; thus, safeguarding from a deficiency of internal controls via segregation of duties. Implementation of these slight changes will still allow continuation of standard practice in accepting this application and fee, therefore not upending the process for both customers and staff, ensuring efficiency and customer service, while maintaining financial control.



Response

The Tax Assessor's Office agrees to revise its internal policy to ensure proper financial controls when accepting application filings with payments.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE:

The Tax Assessor's Office plans to take immediate action to revise this policy for the current year. Once the policy is finalized, the Board of Assessors will approve it as an official adopted policy by the March 2024 meeting.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTION(S) TO BE TAKEN:

A policy is being devised to ensure the intake, securement, and transfer of payments received for certain tax assessment applications. Once the policy is finalized and approved by the Board of Assessors, the adopted policy will become standard operating procedure.



Finding Two



Observation

The Tax Assessor's Office staff are both competent and experienced, and appear to keep pace with the growing demand in applicable service delivery, as evidenced by increases in assessed property and annual appeals. Naturally associated with any increased primary functions is an ancillary intensity of customer service related activities (calls, appointments, emails, inquiries, etc.). To that end, the Georgia Department of Revenue pointed out, as cited in their 2022 Digest Review of Clarke county, that ACCGov is not within the IAAO (International Association of Assessing Officers) staffing ratio of under 4,000 accounts per appraiser (see pg. 13). Based on the current total of 42,445 real property parcels within the county, plus 5,945 personal property accounts, and 2,477 mobile homes, totaling 50,867 accounts, this would yield a minimum of 12-13 appraisers for ACCGov. At present, the Tax Assessor's Office has 11 licensed appraisers, which includes the chief appraiser and other office supervisors. Concern lies in the potential impact upon both personnel and service delivery. With the number of properties only expected to increase over time, and the number of appeals filed unpredictable from year-to-year (though trending upward), there is a risk for staff burn-out, as well as overall efficiency and capability to meet expectations.

Although the chief appraiser should be commended for maintaining satisfactory service levels over the past decade with no real change in allocated staff positions, it remains questionable for how long such a trend can be sustained, given the statistical increase in workload, specifically the number of properties assessed (real and personal) and appeals processed. Analysis of the past 14 fiscal year budgets indicates that the present FY24 approved staffing level of 14 full-time positions is now equivalent to the FY11 approved staffing level. More than a decade has passed in between, during which the office operated with a staff of only 13. According to the chief appraiser, a reduction was necessitated in FY12 due to mandatory budget cuts associated with the Great Recession.



Recommendation

In accordance with the IAAO's recommended ratio for appraisers, as confirmed by the Georgia Department of Revenue 2022 Digest Review, and in acknowledgement of increasing workloads, OA recommends serious consideration be given to the addition of at least one full-time or two part-time staff positions, when appropriate in the near future, as determined by the chief appraiser. Additionally, this may also improve succession planning and strengthen continuity of operations should unforeseen circumstances arise in personnel. Added staffing has potential justification in the value added to the overall digest, given the increased accuracy and efficiency of appraisals. It is anticipated that such compensation would essentially "pay for itself" in due time.



Response

The Tax Assessor's office agrees that serious consideration needs to be given to increase the appraisal staff according to these recommendations. The Tax Assessor's Office requested and received one additional appraiser position in the FY23 budget. This position was filled in FY24. Despite this additional position, as noted in the audit recommendations, current staffing levels are not within the IAAO recommended staffing ratio. The audit results had not yet been finalized or received by the department prior to the deadline for department operating budget submissions; however, the Tax Assessor's Office was able to submit a recent request for one additional appraiser position for the Mayor & Commission's consideration in the FY25 budget.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE:

Implementation is dependent upon approval by Mayor & Commission. One position has been requested in the FY25 budget, and depending on the result of this request, the Tax Assessor's Office may also request an additional position for consideration in the FY26 budget process. If approved by Mayor & Commission action, the department will proceed with recruitment within the first quarter of FY25.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTION(S) TO BE TAKEN:

The Tax Assessor's Office has submitted a budget request for one appraiser position. If approved, the Tax Assessor's Office will work with Human Resources to recruit for the position. Once a candidate is selected and the position is filled, the department will begin onboarding the new appraiser and ensure proper training is provided.



Finding Three

Explore Electronic Transmission of Notices



Observation

At present, and in historical practice, the Tax Assessor's Office operates predominately via methods of in-person or mail correspondence for official notices. As an example, notices of assessed value are mailed to all property (real and personal) owners, necessitating both paper and postage. Other similar letters, forms and applications are also processed in a manner that encourages in-person and/or mail communication. Currently, no forms or applications reviewed or approved by the Tax Assessor's Office are capable of electronic submittal directly through the webpage. To a degree, the lack of electronic availability of certain forms or applications may be justified, given the requirement to sign or attest in person or by notary. This does not however appear to be case for all such notices or documents, and even those have the capacity in some manner to be submitted electronically (i.e.: email).



Recommendation

The Tax Assessor's Office is highly encouraged to explore the implementation of electronic transmission of various notices when corresponding with the public.

Per the 2022 Georgia Code Title 48 – Revenue and Taxation, Chapter 5 – Ad Valorem Taxation of Property, Article 5 – Uniform Property Tax Administration and Equalization, Part 2 – County Boards of Tax Assessors 48-5-306. Annual Notice of Current Assessment; Contents; Posting Notice; New Assessment Description (a):

“...The taxpayer may elect in writing to receive all such notices required under this Code section by electronic transmission if electronic transmission is made available by the county board of tax assessors...”

Not only could this strategy keep ACCGov at the forefront of advanced practices in an ever changing technological society, but also promote accessibility for those within the community or those taxpayers who reside elsewhere.



Response

The Tax Assessor's Office agrees to explore the implementation of electronic transmission of various notices when corresponding to the public. Increased budget expenses and board approval will factor into any implementation decisions, as well as any regulatory or legal considerations.

IMPLEMENTATION TIMELINE:

Implementation will depend on any course of action that may be taken. Exploration will begin in FY24 and explored further for FY25 & FY26.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTION(S) TO BE TAKEN:

Electronic transmission of various notices will be explored by Tax Assessor's office. Exploration will include contacting other counties about their feasibility and experience with electronic transmission in FY24 and more consideration for FY25 & FY26. Any consideration for such implementation will include budget viability and Board of Assessor approvals.

Conclusion

Chapter Four

In alignment with the primary topics of focus for a periodic audit, the Office of Operational Analysis offers the following closing remarks based upon points of interest or concern, that, although do not warrant immediate attention, are worthy of consideration, potential follow-up, or future investigation. These highlights are in addition to, and not in place of, the formal findings and recommendations previously announced.

From a programmatic standpoint, the Tax Assessor's Office seems to be operating in alignment of their stated mission, goals, and objectives. The department is recognized consistently as one of the premier units in Georgia for timeliness and accuracy. Overall performance indicates that departmental leadership has a firm grasp of daily activities, promotes productivity by acknowledging the highly skilled and competent staff, and maintains needed control as necessary, without micromanaging.


Like many departments/offices/courts within ACCGov, the Tax Assessor's Office is nearing capacity of physical space in which to function. Future plans regarding construction of a new judiciary center will undoubtedly impact the Tax Assessor's Office, with hopes of providing ample space for existing operations, as well as foresight into potential growth. Whether the department maintains a presence within the renovated, historic courthouse or moves into a new judicial building, adequate thought should be put into how the space can increase morale, comfort, efficiency, storage, and expansion. Until then the department should consider the increased use of off-site storage, as legally allowed and operationally feasible, to free up present floor area.

One practical way in which to justify off-site storage, yet maintain vital records information is to continue the digitization of older property cards and microfilm from previous decades. The department has made great strides in securing both hard copies and digital scans of more modern documents, but there is still a number of properties detailed by hand written notes and film images, not easily transferable to present-day software systems. Such an initiative will provide efficiency in performance, as well as physical space, while also protecting critical information by duplicative means.

Associated with official Finding #2 that proposes more adequate staffing, the topic of succession planning is critical to ACCGov as an organization focused on sustainable operations and service delivery. As demonstrated in Figure 16, the current staff tends to lean toward one end of the range or the other for years of experience with the department. This is not to say that these employees do not possess additional time within the profession as gained from other institutions, or that someone is not capable of promotion to another, advanced role as may be available. Rather, it is simply important to note that emphasis should be placed upon the ability of staff to teach those in a subordinate classification, while also learning from those in a supervisory capacity to promote continuity of operations through applied, in-house succession.

Financially, the Tax Assessor's Office has maintained a fairly conservative approach to budgeting and spending. The department is funded by general dollars, and is not revenue generating. Even so, the Financial Review section clearly indicates only modest percentage increases in yearly operating, and is primarily linked to natural adjustments in compensation and benefits, as well as rising costs in associated professional services, such as software programs. Considering the daily site inspections that occur amongst the multiple assessors, the department should be commended for its shared approach to vehicle usage, keeping related fleet expenses to a minimum.

There is an active initiative by the Manager's Office for all departments (under Management's purview) to create a departmental strategic plan with an outlook of 3-5 years. This effort is separate from, and in addition to, the *Mayor & Commission's Strategic Plan Goals*,



Strategies, and Initiatives. Since the Tax Assessor's Office is outside the direct supervision of the county manager, and reports primarily to the Board of Assessors, fulfillment of this project is optional, and to date, not a task of high priority. That said, the department does develop and modify accordingly annual performance measures as part of the budget process, which also states the mission, goals, and objectives for the Tax Assessor's Office. If anything, a formal strategic plan could provide a more comprehensive outlook for the department, and focus on a variety of topics outside the typical data points tied strictly to assessments or appeals. Ultimately, future undertaking of this voluntary endeavor should be considered.

Overall internal control practices seem prevalent, with required methods in place and only minor exceptions that can be easily remedied. As a matter of practice, the Board of Assessors should follow applicable ACCGov policy or guidance pertaining to publicly held meetings, specifically with regard to video livestream and posting of official minutes. Even if such local expectations are above and beyond those otherwise legally required by the state of Georgia, uniformity in how all ACCGov affiliated boards, authorities, and commissions advertise and make accessible their discussions promotes transparency in government operations. Presently, the Board of Assessors is exempted from such initiatives both in state law and the *ACCGov Boards, Authorities, and Commissions Manual* (2019). However, the Government Operations Committee is expected to undertake this topic in the near future, potentially leading to modifications in policy that should be adhered to if adopted.

Follow-Up

In an effort to gauge the effectiveness and emphasize the purpose of conducting a periodic audit, the Office of Operational Analysis intends to follow up with the Tax Assessor's Office within a year's time and report on the status of any resolution to the findings and recommendations made. The exact schedule will also be considerate of the implementation timelines put forth by the department and/or county management as indicated in this report.

A summary response will be requested at the appropriate time from the subject department, and if necessary, staff from OA will conduct inspections to confirm appropriate actions taken. Any unresolved issues will be brought to the attention of the department and/or county management for further discussion. It is expected that a brief memorandum describing the degree of compliance will be forwarded to the Mayor & Commission for informational purposes.

Appendix

Chapter Five

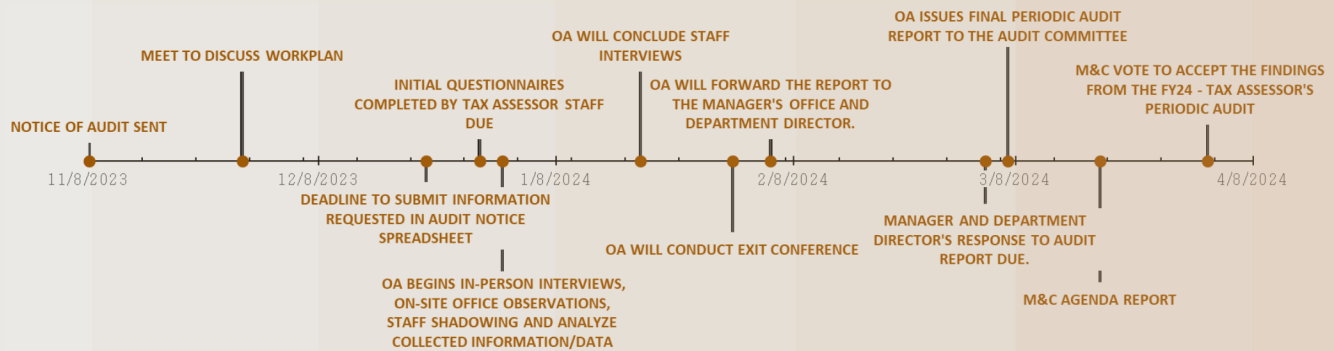
Appendix A

Outcomes and Performance Measures										Comments or Analysis
Goal	DY16	DY17	DY18	DY19	DY20	DY21	DY22	DY23		
Appraise all property located in Athens-Clarke County										
Number of Real Parcels	Data Only	41,805	41,828	41,775	41,913	42,218	42,238	42,278	42,445	Annual digest count
Number of Personal Property Accounts	Data Only	5,277	5,415	5,451	5,579	5,595	5,604	4,260	5,345	Annual digest count
Number of Mobile Homes	Data Only	2,436	2,437	2,438	2,438	2,431	2,458	2,467	2,477	Annual digest count
Achieve fair and equitable valuations of all properties according to state mandated specifications										
Maintain Level of Assessment (FMV)	38%-42%	39.39	39.29	38.73	38.46	38.97	38.27	38.04		Mandated by State of Georgia
Maintain Level of Uniformity	< 15%	8.30	8.54	8.32	9.12	7.84	10.38	10.03		Mandated by State of Georgia
Maintain Level of Assessment Bias	95 - 110	101.58	100.66	100.55	99.80	100.06	99.86	100.06		Mandated by State of Georgia
Georgia Department of Audit Ratio Study	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings	Pass, no findings		Mandated by State of Georgia
Produce a statutorily acceptable digest each year so tax bills can be mailed in a timely manner										
Complete fieldwork reviews by February 1 each year	> 95%	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%	Necessary deadline in producing of tax digest each year
Complete deed transactions reviews by Feb 1 each year	> 95%	97%	96%	99%	99%	99%	97%	96%	97%	Necessary deadline in producing of tax digest each year
Complete mapping updates by Feb 1 each year	> 95%	97%	98%	98%	98%	97%	96%	98%	96%	Necessary deadline in producing of tax digest each year
Complete Personal Property accounts to send notices by first week of May each year	> 95%	99%	96%	99%	99%	*90%	96%	97%	95%	Necessary deadline in producing of tax digest each year
Complete ratio analysis to send notices by first week of May each year	> 98%	100%	100%	100%	100%	*92%	100%	100%	100%	Necessary deadline in producing of tax digest each year
Process appeals within 180 days of receipt	< 180	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	State requirement for processing appeals in timely manner
Produce timely and acceptable tax digest	August 1 each year	Met	Met	Met	Met	Met	Met	Met	Met	State requirement for tax digest submission is September 1 each year

*Pushed back to mid May 2020 due to COVID-19

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TAX ASSESSOR AUDIT TIMELINE



TAX ASSESSOR AUDIT TIMELINE

Date	Event
8-Nov	Notice of Audit Sent
28-Nov	Meet to discuss workplan
22-Dec	Deadline to submit information requested in Audit Notice Spreadsheet
29-Dec	Initial questionnaires completed by Tax Assessor staff due
1-Jan	OA begins in-person interviews, on-site office observations, staff shadowing and analyze collected information/data
19-Jan	OA will conclude staff interviews
31-Jan	OA will conduct exit conference
5-Feb	OA will forward the report to the Manager's Office and Department Director.
4-Mar	Manager and Department Director's response to Audit Report due.
7-Mar	OA issues final Periodic Audit report to the Audit Committee
19-Mar	M&C Agenda Report
2-Apr	M&C Vote to accept the findings from the FY24 - Tax Assessor's Periodic Audit

Tax Assessor's Office

Mission and Goals

The Tax Assessor's Office is responsible for the appraisal of all property located in Athens-Clarke County at its fair market value. The Tax Assessor's Office appraises over 42,000 parcels of real estate, 5,600 business personal property accounts, and 2,500 manufactured homes on an annual basis. To ensure equalization between similar properties, the county is divided into approximately 550 residential neighborhoods and 100 commercial neighborhoods so sales can be analyzed on an annual basis. All property values must be approved by the three-member Board of Tax Assessors prior to any change in value in order to ensure the tax digest is in compliance with state statutes. Members of the Board of Tax Assessors are appointed for a six-year term by the Athens-Clarke County Mayor & Commission. Currently the Tax Assessor's Office has a staff of thirteen appraisers and a total yearly budget of \$1,100,000.

Services

Property Appraisal –This service provides for the appraisal of real property, business and personal property, automobiles, boats, and airplanes. The appraised value is used to determine the total value of all taxable property in Clarke County. This information is passed onto the Tax Commissioner's Office in order to compile a yearly digest for billing and collection of taxes. The three members of the Board of Tax Assessors are appointed for six-year staggered terms by the Athens-Clarke County Mayor & Commission. The Board meets at least once every month to set policy, to review correspondence requiring their input, to review and approve appraisal information from staff, and to determine what exemptions and specialized assessments are granted to individual properties. The major role of the assessors is to ensure that the tax digest is in compliance with state statutes before accepting the digest from the chief appraiser each year. The approval of the digest values occurs prior to any changes in value being sent to the property owners.

Information Management–This service provides for the management of tax assessment records in ~~compliance with local and state laws.~~ The Tax Assessor's Office maintains the records of ownership and exemptions for all parcels in the county. The information on past and present owners of property is accessible by the general public on the county website for the appraisal of real property, business and personal property, automobiles, boats, and airplanes. They also maintain and provide geographic information system (GIS) data and maps to other government departments and the general public. The county websites are public.net/ga/clarke and www.accgov.com.

Programs

Real Property Appraisal –activities include assessing individual properties such as land, homes, buildings, and other improvements through field visits, calculating property values through the review of comparative sales within the same neighborhood, and maintaining up-to-date valuations of all parcels within the ratios set by state regulations.

Each year the Tax Assessor's Office must review property values for its fair market value and its equality between similar properties. After all sales transactions and all property updates have been entered into the appraisal system, ratio studies are run by neighborhoods to compare the current assessed values of properties against their actual sales prices. The valuation date for assessors is January 1 of each tax year so sales up through December 31 of the previous year are used for the

current year tax digest. Certain measurable statistics must be met each year in order to assure, not only the taxpayers, but also the Departments of Revenue and the Department of Audits that properties are being valued fairly, uniformly, and equally.

Taxes in most of Georgia are based on a property's assessed value which is 40% of the appraised value. Therefore, one of the measured statistics is based on the assessed (40%) value of a property compared to its actual sales price. The arrived output is referred to as an assessment ratio.

Business and Personal Property Appraisal—activities include assessing the value of business and personal property, including boats, airplanes, and commercial equipment/inventory.

They also process Freeport exemptions for commercial entities according to state regulations and local ordinances. The Freeport exemption, approved by ACC voters, exempts 100% of the inventory for certain manufacturers, under certain conditions. These inventories are exempt from ad Valorem taxation, including all such taxes levied for county, educational and for State purposes. All business and personal property schedules are established and set by the State of Georgia.

Each year the Tax Assessor's Office conducts:

- Approximately 5,600 appraisals of business/personal property parcels
- More than 200 field/desk audits of business/personal property

Public Information—activities include information that is made available by the Tax Assessor's Office ~~to the general public~~ through their website. The office staff also responds to requests through phone and in office consultations.

Each year the Tax Assessor's Office:

- Responds to approximately 12,000 taxpayer inquiries
 - Receives and delivers hundreds of requests yearly for appraisal data records and information

Property Record Keeping—activities include maintaining records of property ownership, all property sales, property splits, and a legal description of property for all ACC parcels.

Each year the Tax Assessor's Office:

- Records and processes 200 – 1,000 property splits
- Updates ownership transactions from approximately 3,600 – 4,200 deeds
 - Maintains the property record information and eligible exemptions of 42,000+ real parcels
- Maintains the property record information and eligible exemptions of 5,600 personal accounts

Geographic Information Systems (GIS)—activities include maintaining the GIS database parcel layer, ~~updating property lines, adding new subdivisions~~ and parcels, and sharing this information with other ACCG departments and with the public on our internet sites qpublic.net/ga/clarke and accgov.com.

Each year the Tax Assessor's Office:

- Updates 200 - 1,000 property line adjustments due to splits/combinations
- Works on approximately 3,600 - 4,200 deeds
- Maintains the property lines of over 42,000 parcels

Annual Timeline of Real Property Assessment Activity

Assess Value		Notify Owner		Answer Inquires
Resolve Appeals				
January-April		May-June		July-October
October-December				
Assess Real Property Value		Update Digest/Notify Property Owner		Submit Digest
Review Exemptions		Notify Property Owner		Answer Inquiries
Attend Hearings/Resolve Appeals		Begin New Digest Process		
Activities		Activities		Activities
Office receives deeds information from Clerk of Court & permit information from Planning Department*		Supervisors assure information is updated in WinGAP software*		Administrative Assistant fields telephone, email & walk-in inquiries; forwards to appropriate appraiser ^
Supervisors and staff enter updates into WinGAP software*		Information is exported from WinGAP software to third-party vendor software		Appraiser reviews inquiry; contacts owner
Staff updates GIS parcel maps per deed information*		Third-party vendor prints assessment notices; mails to address on file		Appraiser compares owner appeal with WinGAP records
Appraisers perform field inspections per permitting information*		Administrative assistant receives and files notices returned by USPS ^		Appraiser explains and attempts to resolve assessment appeal with property owner
Appraisers enter results of field inspections into WinGAP software*		Administrative Assistant distributes returned items and/or update address information per owner requests ^		Appraiser performs field inspections as necessary
Office notifies Planning/Code Enforcement Departments as necessary regarding findings*		Staff answers inquiries from property owners ^		
Assessment Fair Market Value/Uniform		Notifications Accurate/Timely		Inquiries Efficient/Effective
Staff is dependent on manual entry of deed and permitting updates		Vendor for notification mailings is determined annually based on pricing		Appeals Outcome/Public Perception
Personal Property Appraiser assists with entry of real property GIS information		Change of address notifications can be made with either Tax Assessor or Tax Commissioner		Appeals may be settled by Hearing Officer, Board of Equalization or arbitration
Appraisers work in pairs to do field visits, using tape measures, digital camera and pencil/paper notes to record information in the field*		Large volume of returned mailings requires space for storage		Appeals often require appraisal staff to spend several hours in proceedings
Only IT Supervisor has access to Planning Department software platform (Clariti)		Staff is diligent in helping owners update addresses and seeing they are provided with returned items, upon proper identification		Appeals to Superior Court tend to be somewhat rare
*Indicates year-round activity		^ Indicates year-round activity with greater frequency during indicated seasonal period		

County	Population	Tax Assessor Budget	# of Staff	Total Valuation	Equalization Ratio	Answer Telephone	
						In-Person	Online Minutes
Athens-Clarke	128,711	\$1,226,600	14	\$16,724,474,684	38.04	Y	
Augusta-Richmond	202,081	\$2,915,280	37	\$19,714,691,696	36.02	Y	
Chatham	295,291	\$6,271,376	38	\$59,052,657,204	37.97	N	
Columbus-Muscogee	206,922	\$1,752,035	27	\$18,203,386,665	36.39	Y	
Macon-Bibb	157,346	\$2,373,913	23	\$13,537,244,757	39.14	N	
Digital Filing Services Available							
Municipality	Homestead App	Appeal	PP Returns	Change of Address	Online Agendas	Online Minutes	
Athens-Clarke	N	N	N	N	Y	N	
Augusta-Richmond	N	Y	N	Y	Y	N	
Chatham	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
Columbus-Muscogee	N	Y	Y	N	N	N	
Macon-Bibb	N	N	N	N	N	Y	