



Commissioners Split Tax Claim And Assessment

By DONALD GILLILAND MANAGING EDITOR

The Potter County Commissioners have instituted a major change in the way the county assesses properties and collects delinquent taxes.

The commissioners have split Tax Claim and Tax Assessment into two separate offices on two different floors of the Gunzburger Annex with two separate staffs.

Chief Clerk Todd Brown, who has only been in the position three months, was appointed Tax Claim Director at the commissioners last meeting. The duties will be added to Brown's Chief Clerk responsibilities at no extra remuneration.

Deanna Johnston, who is currently the only employee in the new Tax Claim office, has been moved out of Assessment and into the main floor office suite with Brown, the county fiscal officer and the commissioners' executive secretary.

Chief Assessor Joe Lewis, who has been shorn of his Director of Tax Claim title, is one floor below in a separate office with a staff of two who will devote their efforts entirely

to assessment duties.

The commissioners are in the process of hiring another employee for the Tax Claim office, likely to be part-time, to help Johnston and to answer the phone.

The commissioners acknowledge the workload in Tax Claim is season, with the most work in the spring and summer months, when properties are being posted for tax sale.

"There are times you need a person in there more than others," said Commissioner Chairman Doug Morley. "We tried to look at it is it full time or a position that sometimes is and sometimes isn't?"

But they also acknowledge an ongoing need for receptionist duties.

"We will have the need for someone to sit at that window" while Johnston does her work, said Morley. "Not that you have a continuous workload, but you have a continuous period of time - 8:30 to 4:30."

The commissioners are also anticipating increased staffing in the Assessment office to handle the increased workload that will come next year when - by state law - local

assessors in the townships and boroughs will be eliminated.

That "changes the dynamics in assessment" said Morley, though at the moment they don't know the exact number of new hires.

Morley acknowledged that the new hires will increase the annual

trouble meeting their obligations.

If they make arrangements beforehand with Tax Claim, taxpayers who are in arrears can make monthly installment payments. If they miss a payment, however, they could still be subject to having their property listed and ultimately sold through

of his time to assessment duties.

"It helps us become much more effective in allowing us to focus 100 percent of our time on assessments instead of half or 60 percent of our time," said Lewis. "(Before) we spent from essentially the mid-end of June until September focused on nothing but tax sales and delinquent taxes."

Previously, he said, the majority of "maintenance work" on the assessment rolls - when the Chief Assessor goes out into the field and checks properties - has been done in the late fall and winter months. Many properties are on gated subdivision roads requiring the county officers to walk upwards of a mile or more through unplowed snow.

More time and better weather will combine to insure more accurate tax records.

At least one downside - apart from the increased cost - will be the balkanization of skills and talent. Whereas previously all employees in Tax Claim and Assessment were cross-trained, employees will no longer be able to switch back and

forth between the two functions. The most evident consequence of that is the immediate need for a receptionist for Tax Claim, but going forward, promotions will no longer be able to be made within and between the two offices without extra training. There will be a diminished pool of cross-trained employees to choose from to fill future vacancies.

There also may be times - particularly at lunch time - when services will not be available to the public because of a lack of cross-trained back-up.

In explaining their move, the commissioners said it was "all about efficiency."

With technology upgrades, increased focus on county finances and the impending loss of local assessors, Morley said it would be "much easier to keep the database current and direct the expertise where they need to be" with the offices separate.

"Looking and Tax Claim and Tax Assessment - they really are two dif-

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"Based on the 21st Century, where we're at and where we're headed, everything for the last 120 years might be up for review."

- Commissioner Doug Morley

expenditures of the county - likely by a minimum of \$36,000 - but he said, "Sometimes you're just forced to spend money because you need to."

Another change that may add for work for the new part-time receptionist in Tax Claim is the commissioners' announcement that a new payment plan is being made available to taxpayers who are having

the annual Upset Sale.

In a press release from the commissioners, Brown said he was confident that the option of monthly installment payments would be more convenient to many of those who have fallen behind on their taxes.

The advantage of splitting the two offices, according to Chief Assessor Lewis, is that for the first time he will be able to devote 100 percent

First In A Series -

School-Based Mental Health: Innovative And Effective

By DONALD GILLILAND MANAGING EDITOR

Potter County has one of the more progressive school-based support systems for students in Pennsylvania, an initiative launched several years ago by Judge John B. Leete, the former board of Commissioners, Potter County Human Services and local school administrators in response to a spike in teen suicides.

The Yellow Ribbon Program is only one of the services now regularly available in local schools.

These services are provided through Dickinson Mental Health, and as Debbie Hamilton - the staffer who coordinates the school-based program - emphasizes: the services go far beyond the stereotypical "mental health" issues that form the basis of the common stigma associated with such programs.

The Dickinson school-based programs are first and foremost designed "to help kids get over the obstacles that are getting in the way of their education - life struggles, depression, anxiety, boyfriend/girlfriend issues, etc." said Hamilton.

Currently there are four types of services and programs available for local students.

The Yellow Ribbon Suicide Prevention program has been well-covered in recent years, with student-run clubs in each school and a county-wide support network.

There is also an anti-bullying program run in conjunction with Potter County Human Services and Dickinson that is based on a tested national model and involves weekly classroom discussion sessions led by regular teachers.

Hamilton said, "Kids talk about issues in general - sometimes bul-

lying issues, sometimes life issues. Sometimes there are short 15-minute lessons, such as how bystanders can be a powerful force in stopping bullying and what kids can do to stop bullying. The 'Olweus' model, which the program is based on, believes bystanders are the most powerful."

This "Olweus Bullying Prevention Program" is in the third year of a four-year grant, and recent statistics indicate it is having a positive effect (see sidebar story below).

Less well-publicized - and perhaps most effective of all the services - is the Student Assistance Program (SAP), which puts Dickinson mental health counselors in each school every week to offer up to five free 45-minute supportive counselling sessions for students who are having problems.

And those problems could be anything from self-esteem issues to dealing with family issues at home.

"This isn't therapy," notes Ham-

ilton. "It's supportive counselling that's educationally-based. Let's talk about coping issues, anger management, self-esteem... developing strategies to cope."

Dickinson employs three liaisons in charge of providing these services to middle school and high school students: R.G. Gascon, Natalie Stenhach and Jennifer Kibbe.

These counsellors are also in charge of the school-based Yellow Ribbon programs as advisors, so there is continuity of services within the school.

If at the end of the five counselling sessions, the professional doesn't feel like the student's issues have been resolved, "we call mom and dad and refer the student to other services - whatever service they need," said Hamilton.

But the vast majority of problems are dealt with in those school-based

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Statistics On Bullying Show Improvement

According to recent statistics generated by fourth- through eighth graders, Potter County's Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP) is succeeding in its goal of reducing bullying among middle school students.

The OBPP, an evidence-based grant funded program, is administered by Potter County Human Services in partnership with Dickinson Mental Health Center and all Potter County School Districts.

To help measure OBPP's impact on Potter County students each year, a paper version of the OBPP student questionnaire is completed anonymously by participating students

- 777 this year, versus a sample of 630 students last year. The increased sample size is primarily due to two additional grades joining the program in 2008-09. Each school receives its own survey report based on their students' responses. The aggregate county-wide results have been combined into a single county-wide report for 2009, with highlights (and comparisons to the 2008 OBPP student questionnaire county-wide results) as follows:

More than half (55.5%) of all surveyed students report not being bullied

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Jack Goga

Goga Named CEO Of Dickinson

Dickinson Mental Health Center, Inc. (DMHC) has announced the appointment of Jack Goga as its new Chief Executive Officer.

Goga, a licensed psychologist, brings 35 years of clinical and behavioral health management experience to this leadership post. His appointment was announced to the DMHC organization on June 5.

Goga, a native of the Pittsburgh area, received his Bachelor's degree in psychology from the Pennsylvania State University. He then went on to earn his Master's in clinical psychology from the Indiana University of Pennsylvania and was conferred li-

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STATE RURAL HEALTH LEADER OF THE YEAR

Michael Huff, left, state deputy secretary of health, planning and assessment, presents Ed Pitchford, president and chief executive officer, Charles Cole Memorial Hospital, with the State Rural Health Leader of the Year Award during the 2009 Pennsylvania Rural Health Conference at the Pennsylvania State University June 3.

Cole Memorial CEO Recognized For Leadership

Ed Pitchford, president and chief executive officer at Charles Cole Memorial Hospital, was named State Rural Health Leader of the Year during the 2009 Pennsylvania Rural Health Conference at the Pennsylvania State University on June 3.

Pitchford was elected to the Pennsylvania Rural Health Association board of directors last June and serves on the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania Public Policy Committee and Council of Small Hospitals. Over the past year, he was instrumental in working with state legislators to secure \$11 million in additional funding for critical access hospitals in Pennsylvania and to introduce widely endorsed legislation to make this funding permanent. He testified before the Pennsylvania Public Health and Welfare Committee and worked with the Senate republican leadership in crafting proposed legislation to enhance access to primary care throughout Pennsylvania. Most recently, his hospital hosted 13 Repub-

lican State Representatives for a forum on rural health issues and innovations in rural emergency medicine.

"Ed Pitchford has provided a great service, not only to patients in the Potter County area, but across rural Pennsylvania," said state Rep. Marty Causar. "He has truly earned this honor, as there is no greater advocate for rural health care. I look forward to continuing to work with him to further enhance the quality and accessibility of care in our region."

"Charles Cole Memorial Hospital has been and will continue to be a leader for rural health and health care providers," Pitchford said. "I am proud to follow in the footsteps of previous CEOs here at Cole who made a difference. From creating the first provider-based rural health center in the country to organizing the Pennsylvania Mountains Healthcare Alliance which has become widely known as a

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Father Accused Of Beating 6-Month-Old Baby Bound To Court

By KIMBERLEY HOAK STAFF REPORTER

Robert Lee Fiske, 21, of Genesee, who has been lodged in the Potter County jail in lieu of \$100,000 straight bail, for allegedly beating his 6 month-old son, over the course of his six months of life, was bound over to the Court of Common Pleas yesterday on all charges after a preliminary hearing held before District Judge Barbara Easton.

Fiske currently is charged with one count of first degree felony aggravated assault; one count of third degree felony endangering the welfare of children; one count of first degree misdemeanor simple assault; one count of second degree misdemeanor recklessly endangering; and, one count of summary harassment.

At yesterday's hearing, Potter County Assistance District Attorney Jessica Songster represented the Commonwealth. She called Dr. Mary Ann Rigas, a pediatrician at Charles Cole Memorial Hospital as her first witness.

Dr. Rigas was the doctor called in to examine the baby after he was referred to the hospital by a nurse at one of the satellite clinic offices

located in Northern Potter.

The nurse was concerned, in part, because of all of the "bruising," she saw on the baby, Dr. Rigas testified. "She did not expect to see bruising," she said.

Dr. Rigas described the injuries to the baby boy - the fractured skull; the two breaks in his arm that were in the process of healing; the bulging of the soft spot on his head; the bruises that covered his legs and went down onto his feet; the bruises on his forehead; the scratches on his face; the abrasions on his forehead and nose; and, his ear infection.

"Could these injuries have been self-inflicted?" Songster asked Dr. Rigas.

"No," she responded. "Generally speaking, infants who do not ambulate, in other words do not walk... generally do not bruise... and there is no explanation for the abrasions."

Dr. Rigas did say that the skull fracture "was a little more complicated." She acknowledged that it was possible the fracture "could have occurred" if the baby fell off a couch or a bed.

"But," she said, "there is no way he could have done that on his own."

"In your experience, are the in-

juries this baby sustained consistent with child abuse," Songster asked Dr. Rigas.

"Yes - they are consistent," Dr. Rigas answered.

Under cross-examination by Fiske's attorney, Potter County Public Defender Brent Petrosky, Dr. Rigas was asked if the broken bones in the baby's arm could have been "caused by the baby getting his wrist caught in a baby swing."

"Could that have caused the

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More Charges Against Man Accused In Autsin Drug Death

By KIMBERLEY HOAK STAFF REPORTER

Steven C. Schneider, 38, of Austin, who was charged in March with first degree misdemeanor Involuntary Manslaughter in the drug overdose death of Brock L. Hoofallen, 24, of Austin, was charged last week by Coudersport Borough Police with felony criminal attempt, and two misdemeanor counts involving giving false reports to law enforcement authorities.

The new charges lodged against Schneider stem from his alleged complaint to Coudersport Borough Police Officers that he had been assaulted and his prescription medication had been stolen from him after he left a local pharmacy.

A warrant for Schneider's arrest was issued by District Judge Annette Easton last Tuesday. At press time, there was no return on the warrant at her office.

Before the charges were filed last

week, Schneider was free on \$10,000 unsecured bail after he waived his preliminary hearing in March on charges filed by Austin Borough Police Chief Kyle Day alleging he was the individual who provided the drugs to Brock Hoofallen which ultimately were responsible for killing him.

According to Potter County Coroner Kevin Dusenbury when the

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Complete Local Election Results

By KIMBERLEY HOAK STAFF REPORTER

Potter County Director of Voter Registration, Sandy Lewis provided the Leader-Enterprise with the final election results from the Primary Election held on May 19.

Lewis explained that where results show "write-in candidate" she has intentionally left it that way because she, "does not know yet if the person receiving the most votes will accept the nomination."

Lewis said she has, "sent out 40 letters so far" to candidates of "various write-in offices to see if they accept or decline their nomination."

"Those folks have until July 17 to notify me of their decision," Lewis

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