

P.O. Box 47471
Olympia, WA 98504-7471

Washington Department of Revenue
Property Tax Division

2018 Columbia County
Levy Audit
A Summary Report



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Overview

Purpose

The Department of Revenue's (Department) primary purpose of this review is to assist the Columbia County Assessor (Assessor) in their processes and procedures to ensure compliance with state statutes and regulations.

Method of Calculation

The Department calculated the levy limitations and levy rates for several of the taxing districts for the 2018 tax year. To determine whether an error occurred, the Department compared the amount levied for the district with the lesser of the levy limit, the statutory rate limit, the amount each district's resolution authorized, and the levy amount the district certified.

Information Reviewed

The Department reviewed the following information:

- Resolutions/Ordinances the districts adopted
- Levy certification from the county legislative authority (RCW 84.52.070)
- Tax roll certification to the county treasurer and abstract of the tax roll to the county auditor
- Ballot measures
- Levy limit worksheets
- \$5.90 aggregate and 1 percent constitutional limits

We do not review every taxing district's levy. We audited approximately 40 percent of the taxing districts. The scope of the audit did not include the review of earmarked funds.

Taxing Districts Selected

The Department reviewed the following taxing district levies:

- City/Towns: Dayton and Starbuck
- Fire Districts: #3
- Library Districts: Columbia County Rural District
- School Districts: Garfield and Waitsburg
- Port Districts: Columbia

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Department's primary purpose of a levy audit is to assist the county assessor in successfully performing the duties associated with levying property taxes for the districts within the county.

An effective audit of levy calculations consists of gathering information from the assessor's office to determine the level of compliance with laws and rules, the accuracy of levy calculations, and the effectiveness of record keeping.

Categories of Results

The Department has completed its review and grouped the results into two categories:

- The first category, *Requirements*, is of the greatest urgency for effective administration by the assessor. A change is required to adhere to the law.
- The second category, *Recommendations*, requires the attention of the assessor. The Department believes the assessor could improve their performance and service to the public by making voluntary changes in procedures.

The Department bases requirements and recommendations in our reports on our review of the administrative procedures employed, existing state statutes and regulations, and areas we saw opportunities to improve processes, procedures, and communication.

Results

The Department identified two requirements directed toward improving the accuracy of the levy process.

We have listed a summary of these items in the Requirements section.

Executive Summary, continued

Requirements

1. The Assessor is required to review the constitutional 1 percent aggregate limitations. When the Assessor exceeds these limits, he or she must reduce or eliminate the rates until the Assessor no longer exceeds the limitation.
2. The Assessor is required to certify values to the taxing districts at least 12 working days before November 30. This provides the taxing districts with the assessed value information necessary to complete their budget certifications by November 30. (RCW 84.48.130)

Requirements

For the items listed as “Requirements,” the Assessor must make changes in procedure to comply with law.

This section contains the requirements we identified.

Constitutional 1 Percent Aggregate Limit Worksheet

Requirement

The Assessor is required to review the constitutional 1 percent aggregate limitations. When the Assessor exceeds these limits, he or she must reduce or eliminate the rates until the Assessor no longer exceeds the limitation.

What the law says

When levies imposed by taxing districts exceed the constitutional 1 percent aggregate limits, levy rates must be reduced or eliminated until the limitation is no longer exceeded. (RCW 84.52.010)

What we found

The Assessor's constitutional 1 percent aggregate worksheet incorrectly listed the State School Levy part two as the refund fund levy.

The Assessor did not exceed the constitutional 1 percent aggregate limit.

Action needed to meet requirement

The Department requires the Assessor to take the following action(s):

- Update the reference of refund fund levy to State School Levy part two.

Why it's important

Documentation of the levy limitations provides a clear and transparent record of the levy calculation process.

Certifications of Values to Taxing Districts

Requirement

The Assessor is required to certify values to the taxing districts at least 12 working days before November 30. This provides the taxing districts with the assessed value information necessary to complete their budget certifications by November 30. (RCW 84.48.130)

What the law says

The assessor is required to certify both locally and state assessed utility values to the taxing districts at least 12 working days before November 30.

What we found

The Assessor did not certify values to the taxing districts.

Action needed to meet requirement

The Department requires the Assessor to take the following action(s):

- Certify assessed values to the taxing districts at least 12 days before November 30.

Why it's important

Timely certification of assessed values to the taxing districts will enable the assessor and all entities involved to meet the yearly deadlines state law as requires.

Next Steps

Follow-up

The Department is committed to the success of the Assessor by ensuring the levies comply with state statutes and regulations.

The Department will conduct a follow-up review in February 2019. This will give the Assessor an opportunity to implement the required changes, recommended changes, and to provide information to the Department about any issues they encountered during the implementation process.

Questions

For questions about specific requirements or recommendations in our report, please contact the Property Tax Division at (360) 534-1400.

For additional information contact:

Washington State Department of Revenue
Property Tax Division
PO Box 47471
Olympia, WA 98504-7471
(360) 534-1400
<http://dor.wa.gov>

Appendix – General Information

Introduction

General information provided to assist all assessors and taxing districts.

Contents

This section contains the following topics:

- Regular Levy Limitation
- Refunds
- Excess Levy
- Timber Assessed Value (TAV)
- Assessor Guidelines

Regular Levy Limitations

What are the statutory limitations?

Regular property tax levies are generally considered to be those levies that are subject to several statutory limitations.

The assessor must adhere to the following statutory limitations:

- Levy limit (a.k.a., 101 percent)
- Statutory dollar rate limit
- Amount authorized by resolution/ordinance
- District budget
- \$5.90 aggregate limit
- 1 percent constitutional limit

Levy Limit

The amount of regular property taxes a taxing district can levy, other than the state and port district industrial development levies, is limited to an amount that will not exceed the amount resulting from the following calculation:

- The highest amount that could have been lawfully levied by the taxing district in any year since 1985 for 1986 collection, multiplied by the limit factor; plus
- A dollar compensation calculated by multiplying the district's levy rate for the preceding year, or the last year the district levied taxes, by the increase in assessed value of the district from the previous year attributable to:
 1. New construction
 2. Increases in assessed value due to wind turbine, solar, biomass, and geothermal facilities (if the facilities generate electricity)
 3. Improvements to property
 4. Any increase in assessed value of state assessed property.

If an error occurred or an error correction was made in the previous year, use the levy rate that would have been levied had no error occurred.

The limit factor used in calculating the levy limit is defined in RCW 84.55.005 and WAC 458-19-005.

Regular Levy Limitations, continued

If the district's population is...	Then the limit factor is...
less than 10,000	101 percent.
greater than 10,000 and a finding of substantial need was made	the lesser of the substantial need factor or 101 percent.
for all other taxing districts	the lesser of 101 percent or 100 percent plus inflation.

Reference:

- RCW 84.55.010
- RCW 84.55.0101
- WAC 458-19-020

Statutory Rate Limit

The statutory rate limit varies by district. These limits are found in the various statutes for each type of district and in the *Property Tax Levies Operations Manual*. The levy amount for each district cannot exceed the statutory maximum rate. The statutory dollar rate limits for senior taxing districts can be found in RCW 84.52.043(1). The statutory dollar rate limits for all taxing districts can be found in the levy manual, chapter 3.

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.043
- Property Tax Levies Operation Manual, https://dor.wa.gov/sites/default/files/legacy/Docs/Pubs/Prop_Tax/LevyManual.doc, chapter 3

Truncating Levy Rates

The final certified levy rate cannot result in a levy amount that exceeds the statutory limitations. To ensure that the final levy rate results in a levy amount at or below the statutory levy limit for each taxing district the assessor must truncate the rate at the last digit (not round).

If truncating the levy rate for a bond levy results in a levy amount less than the amount requested by the district, the levy rate must be rounded up to ensure sufficient funds are levied for the repayment of the debt.

Regular Levy Limitations, continued

Resolutions/Ordinances

The amount authorized by a district in its resolution or ordinance is another limitation on taxation. If a district does not adopt a resolution/ordinance compliant with RCW 84.55.120, the district cannot levy more than it received in the previous year, other than the increase amount resulting from the following:

1. New Construction
2. Improvements to property
3. Wind turbines
4. Solar, biomass, and geothermal facilities (if the facilities generate electricity)
5. Increases in state-assessed property

The resolution or ordinance must state the increase over the previous year's levy in terms of percentage and dollars. The resolution is separate from the budget certification.

Reference:

- RCW 84.55.120

<https://dor.wa.gov/legacy/Docs/forms/PropTx/Forms/OrdinanceResolution.doc>

Regular Levy Limitations, continued

Levy Certification (Budget)

Taxing districts that wish to levy must certify a budget or budget estimate to the county legislative authority by November 30 of the assessment year. (**Note:** the November 30 deadline does not apply if the assessor has not certified assessed values to the taxing district at least twelve working days prior to November 30).

The county legislative authority must certify the amount to levy for each of the taxing districts, including the county, to the assessor on or before November 30 of each year. However, the county legislative authority may elect to conduct its budget hearing on the first Monday in December, as permitted by RCW 36.40.071.

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.020
- RCW 84.52.070
- <https://dor.wa.gov/legacy/Docs/forms/PropTx/Forms/LevyCertf.doc>

\$5.90 Limit

The \$5.90 limit applies to the total of most regular levies in each tax code area. The aggregate of the junior and senior taxing districts (excluding the state levy and a few others) cannot exceed \$5.90 per \$1,000 of assessed value.

RCW 84.52.010 provides the order in which taxing districts rates are prorated, in order to bring the aggregate rate down to \$5.90. The \$5.90 limitation does not apply to levies made by or for:

- The support of common schools (state levy)
- Port districts
- Public utility districts
- Conservation futures
- Criminal justice
- Emergency medical services
- Affordable housing
- Metropolitan parks (if voters protect a portion of the levy from this limit)
- County ferry districts
- County transit
- Regional transit authority

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.043

Regular Levy Limitations, continued

1 Percent Constitutional Limit

The 1 percent constitutional limit is based on true and fair value, unlike the \$5.90 limit, which is based on assessed value.

In 1972, the voters adopted a constitutional limit of 1 percent. This limits the amount of property taxes that may be imposed on an individual parcel (real or personal) of property without voter approval of 1 percent of its true and fair value.

The 1 percent limit applies to all regular levies (except port and public utility district levies). It does not apply to excess levies approved by the voters.

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.050
- RCW 84.52.010
- Article 7, Section 2 of Washington Constitution

Refunds

Types of Refunds

There are two types of refunds:

- Adjudicated (court ordered)
- Administrative

Use this table to decide how to levy for a refund

If the refund is an...	Then...	And...
Adjudicated refund	the district is required to levy the refund	the refund is added to the district's levy.
Administrative refund	the refund levy is optional	the refund may be added to the levy only if the district requests the refund in its levy certification or budget.

Note: the statutory limit cannot be exceeded when adding a refund to the levy.

Reference:

- RCW 84.68.040 (adjudicated refund)
- RCW 84.69.180 and RCW 84.69.020 (administrative refund)
- WAC 458-19-085 (adjudicated and administrative refunds)

Excess Levy

What is an Excess Levy

Excess levies are over and above the regular property tax levies.

- Excess levies require voter approval
- Duration of excess levies is subject to limitations
- Excess levies are not subject to the statutory limitations placed on regular levies

Type of Levy	Taxing District	Duration
Bond	Most districts	Long term debt, usually 15-20 years
Maintenance & Operational (M&O)	School and fire districts	2-4 years
General	Most districts except school and fire districts	1 year
Technology	School	2-6 years
Transport Vehicle	School	2 years
Construction/Modernization/Remodeling	School and fire districts	2-6 years

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.052
 - RCW 84.52.053
 - RCW 84.52.056
 - RCW 84.52.130
- <https://dor.wa.gov/get-form-or-publication/ballot-measure-requirements>

Timber Assessed Value (TAV)

What is Timber Assessed Value?

Timber assessed value determines each taxing district's share of the timber excise tax revenue and in setting property tax levy rates. It serves as a substitute for the value that would be carried on the assessment roll if timber were taxable as real property for all bond and excess levy calculations.

Components of TAV

Based on taxes levied, acreage, and assessed value of property in the Designated Forest Land Program (DFL) from the prior tax year, and the estimated public acreage available for timber harvesting (RCW 84.33.089), the assessor calculates the following values:

- Composite tax rate
- Forest land assessed value (FLAV)
- Average assessed value per acre on privately owned DFL

After making these calculations, the assessor has all the information necessary to complete the Timber Tax Distribution Priority 1, 2, and 3 worksheets. The priority worksheets list the individual taxing district's TAV that is to be added to the district's taxable value for levy calculations.

Tax Base

The assessor must ensure that the appropriate amount of TAV is included in the tax base for calculating excess levies.

If the levy type is...	Then use this percentage of TAV in the tax base...
Bond	100 percent
Capital Project	100 percent
Transportation Vehicle	100 percent
School M&O	50 percent of TAV or 80 percent of the 1983 timber roll, whichever is greater
All other excess levies	100 percent

Reference:

- RCW 84.52.080(2)

Assessor Guidelines

Introduction

The assessor generally calculates the property tax levy rate necessary to collect the amount of taxes levied for each district, within the limitations provided by law (WAC 458-19-010). Listed below are some of the guidelines for the assessor based on the taxing district's adopted documentation.

Determine the authorized levy amount

Use the table below to determine the authorized levy amount given certain situations.

When the taxing district submits...	Then...
a certified levy request to the county legislative authority, but does not adopt a resolution/ordinance authorizing an increase over the prior year's levy	the district's levy is the lesser of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previous year's levy plus <i>any</i> increase resulting from new construction, improvements to property, wind turbines, solar, biomass, and geothermal facilities (if the facilities generate electricity), and the increased value of state-assessed property. 2. Current year's certified levy request. 3. Levy limit (with a 100% limit factor). 4. Statutory maximum amount.
a resolution/ordinance authorizing an increase over the prior year's levy, but no certified levy request to the county legislative authority	the assessor does not have the statutory authority to levy on behalf of the taxing district.
a certified levy request to the county legislative authority and a resolution/ordinance authorizing an increase over the prior year's levy	the district's levy is the lesser of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Previous year's levy <i>plus</i> the percentage increase authorized by the resolution <i>plus</i> any increase resulting from new construction, improvements to property, wind turbines, solar, biomass, and geothermal facilities (if the facilities generate electricity), and the increased value of state-assessed property. 2. Current year's certified levy request. 3. Levy limit (with a limit factor up to 101% depending on the district's population). 4. Statutory maximum amount.
neither a certified levy request nor a resolution/ ordinance authorizing an increase over the prior year's levy	the assessor does not have the statutory authority to levy on behalf of a taxing district.