

October 13, 2022

Kurt Young
PDC Compliance Officer
Washington Public Disclosure Commission
By email only: pdcc@pdc.wa.gov

Re: Compliant filed by Glen Morgan against Thurston County Assessor Steven Drew.

I am in receipt of your email dated October 6, 2022 that forwarded a complaint filed with the PDC by Glen Morgan based in part on a letter from Mike Brooks, my former chief deputy, in regards to my 2022 election campaign to retain the office of Thurston County Assessor. Your email asked for a response to the complaint and to address a number of specific questions. This is in response to your email.

The complaint alleges two violations. The first allegation relates to a property tax publication which was developed and distributed in the normal and regular conduct of the Assessor's Office. The second allegation deals with a campaign contribution from my former deputy. I will address each allegation separately, but first will provide background in order to provide context for this complaint and the exaggerated and inflammatory statements made by Mr. Brooks in his letter.

My former chief deputy Mike Brooks retired on October 1 after 8 years of service. During his tenure at the Assessor's Office, Mike developed an appraisal application, on county time with county employees. Prior to his retirement, Mike advised me that he wanted to market this product after he retired. On several occasions in those last two months, he asked me to sign an intellectual property agreement that would give him exclusive rights to market this product in the future and would not allow the Thurston County Assessor's Office to share this product with other county assessors. In September, he became quite irate at my refusal to sign such an agreement and that I would have to have any agreement approved by the County Prosecuting Attorney, who is the county's counsel. I also gave the County Prosecuting Attorney a heads up that if I received a proposed agreement, I would be providing it to him for advice and counsel. An agreement was never signed before Mike's retirement, therefore his future plans to profit from his work as a county employee may not go forward.

Allegation 1. It is alleged that I violated RCW 42.17A.555 by producing and distributing a "Property Tax" publication prior to the 2022 election. The complaint alleges that regular and normal conduct of my office is a use of county facilities to support my election campaign. This is patently false.

In the late months of the last Presidential and gubernatorial election when restrictions and closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic were mounting, Assessor field employees began experiencing frequent hostility while conducting property inspections. This occurred despite the fact that employees wore neon vests which clearly identified ASSESSOR, photo ID badges were displayed, cars were clearly marked and had flashing light bars. Each inspection started with a knock at the front door.

Assessor employees were traumatized on many occasions, sometimes involving firearms, sometimes involving dogs, and homeowners blocked driveways to prevent inspectors from leaving. Unfortunately, this pattern of behavior has continued here and in several counties across the state. To some extent this has occurred because more people are home and many were frustrated by mandates, business closures, and other factors.

This situation posed a unique problem that was studied by many prior to arriving at the mailing idea. By combining the content required by statute (RCW 84.40.045) and rule (WAC 458-12-360) with the content needed to address the employee concerns, the cost of the project was \$17,000 less than sending two mailings. Value notices are statutorily required to be mailed to all taxable property owners between June 1 and 30 days after we close the tax rolls. The tax rolls were closed on July 29, 2022. The statute and rules detail minimum content, all of which was included on each adjusted value letter.

From our studies, we learned that two misconceptions inflame some members of the public, in addition to being surprised that their property is required to be inspected at least once every 6th year. The misconceptions are that property taxes rise and fall in proportion to value and that all the money goes to the county. When you read the piece, you will see that these fallacies are addressed, that we answer the question of why we inspect, that we forecast where we will be, that we show how we are marked and we reflect all of the content required by statute such as appeal information, and exemption program information. In addition, the notice includes information about the courthouse moving (at print time this was scheduled to occur during the appeal period), and finally we appeal to folks to be kind to public servants carrying out their duties.

As you can see, the project to change the “Property Tax” (actually a Property Value Change Notice) publication has been in the works for more than a year. My office sought input from the employees’ union and the risk management office. We also sought input from other county assessors. Attached is an email that represents the outreach we did and the information received as a result of this outreach.

Once a decision was made to expand this publication, the Assessor’s Office requested and received additional funding for this new mailing from the Board of Commissioners in the fall of 2021. With employee safety in mind, the new publication clarifies the fact that values and taxes do not change in proportion to one another, explains why we inspect property, details which regions we will be inspecting this fall through next spring, shows how our employees and vehicles are marked, and asks the public to be kind to our employees as they carry out their duties in the field. This publication was designed to provide the legally required information (RCW 84.40.045, WAC 458-12-360) and additional information to both educate the public and provide a safer working environment for my employees. All these efforts are within the authority and conduct of the Assessor’s Office.

Below are my responses to your specific questions.

- Concerning the Thurston County Assessor’s Office “Property Tax” publication that was printed and distributed in 2022, is this a new “Property Tax” publication or has a similar version been produced in prior years by your office?

Response. An annual revaluation notice, the Property Value Change Notice, is required by state law which also specifies minimum content (RCW 84.40.045 and WAC 458-12-360). In prior years a small postcard was mailed which did not have enough space for ADA compliance. 2022 is the first year we shifted to a longer format

- If a similar document had been produced in prior years, how was that document distributed to Thurston County citizens, was it mailed, published on the Thurston County Assessor's website, or distributed via some other means?

Response. A small post card was mailed in prior years.

- Who authorized or made the decision to send this alleged new publication out, how many were printed and mailed out, and what was the total cost?

Response. The decision to send out an expanded mailing followed a year long process involving the labor union, Risk Management and Human Resources as we sought to educate the public as a means to reduce threatening incidents involving our field inspectors over the preceding 18 months, at times involving the brandishing of firearms. Additional funding and consent came from the County Commission by unanimous vote of the commissioners in the fall of 2021 as part of the County budget process. This process is open and transparent to the public. The publication was mailed to taxpayers for every taxable parcel in the county, which is the same mailing list used every year to send out taxpayer information.

In 2021 the Assessor's Office mailed 130,068 postcards at a cost of \$44,941.22. In 2022 we mailed 131,675 letters and the increase in cost was \$27,586.12 including paper, printing, envelope, mail house, and postage.

- Did the Thurston County Assessor's Office send out the "traditional 3 x 5" property tax postcard in 2021?

Response. Yes.

- Is the Thurston County Assessor's Office also sending out the standard property tax postcard in 2022? If yes, when will that be mailed out, and how many do you anticipate will be distributed?

Response. No, all of the content previously sent out by postcard was incorporated into the letter. This letter now replaces the prior year's format.

- Do you know if any other county assessors in Washington State are or have sent out a similar "Property Tax" document, or is this is a new publication being used solely by the Thurston County Assessor's Office?

Response. Yes. I reached out to other county assessors (see attached email chain and FAQ document). Also, the employee safety strategy was discussed at our assessor conference. In fact, upon receiving this notice the director of property tax at the WA Department of Revenue stated that this mailing was a best practice and asked that I send it to all assessors in Washington.

Allegation 2. It is alleged that I violated RCW 42.17A.565 by soliciting a contribution from my then chief deputy. I did solicit a contribution, using a list of prior contributors, of which Mike

Brooks was listed. I did so on my own time, without using any county resources, and therefore believed I was in compliance with the statute.

In 2014, my former chief deputy offered and provided an unsolicited contribution to my 2014 reelection campaign for County Assessor. As such, Mike was on my list of prior contributors.

In late Feb and early March 2022 I made many fundraising calls, that included calls to prior donors. Using my prior contributor's list, when Mike's name came up, I was just thinking of him as a friend and prior supporter. I almost never call people for contributions at their place of business, so these calls often occurred in the evening or on weekends for those not retired. Such was the case when I called Mike and asked for a modest contribution. He immediately said yes and I thanked him. He said he would contribute by check.

A few days later, at the end of a remote meeting, Mike informed me that he had a check for me in an envelope. Since I did not want to use the facilities of the office, I remember telling him that I would swing by the office but could not receive the check in the building. Mike offered to meet me in the public parking lot and I said I would give him a call when I arrived. When Mike came out, he handed me the envelope, I thanked him and wished him a good afternoon. I did not ask Mike for or receive any further contributions.

I have never abused the power of my position of trust nor have I ever made threats (implied or explicit) to extort and extract cash from Mike or any employee of my office. That is not true and an assertion that is most offensive to me.

Over the years I remember Mike saying "let me know how I can help" on more than one occasion. What I do know with absolute clarity is that I never pressured, "coerced" or "harassed" Mike in any way. All that occurred in the fundraising call at issue is I asked Mike, he said yes and I thanked him. At no point did I ever "express or imply a threat". This is a false assertion.

Below are my responses to your specific questions related to this allegation. .

- The complaint alleges that you solicited a contribution in February of 2022 from Mike Brooks, your Chief Deputy Assessor, and that he alleged you received the \$250 monetary contribution from him on or around February 24, 2022, that was deposited into the Campaign bank account on February 28, 2022.

Response. Mike had previously asked "how can I help?" in relation to my reelection campaigns. However, in the 2/24 to 2/28 time frame I did ask for and receive a \$250 contribution.

- Please explain how the \$250 contribution from Mr. Brooks was received by your Campaign on February 28, 2022. Who initiated the contribution conversation, and did you solicit the contribution from Mr. Brooks?

Response. This is answered above. To avoid receiving the contribution in the government building I stopped by to pick it up in the public parking lot.

- Did you solicit the other contributions received by your Campaign on February 28th from Senator Hunt, Representative Dolan and Eric Vanderlip, and if yes, did you solicit the contribution in person, by telephone, email, text, or other?

Response. I contacted many supporters for contributions in this time frame by phone. If the person wanted to give the donation online, I sent them a link by text, email or just referred them to my website. All of the contributions on the 2/28 C3 were by check so were picked up from the contributors.

- If the contribution from Mr. Brooks was not solicited by you, please explain why the contribution was made by him in February of 2022, when you did not have an opponent until Dave Kolar registered with the PDC on May 2, 2022?

Response. This is not applicable. But note, I did raise funds from many people prior to the late registration by my opponent. It is not a violation of law to solicit contributions for your campaign before you have an opponent.

Thank you for the opportunity to address this complaint. Please let me know if you have additional questions or wish to follow up on any of the information provided.

Steven Drew

From: Hjelle, Linda <Linda.Hjelle@co.snohomish.wa.us>
Sent: Wednesday, March 23, 2022 12:34:21 PM
To: Steven Drew, Assessor <steven.drew@co.thurston.wa.us>
Subject: RE: re val letter content/format

I haven't explored that yet.

Linda Hjelle,
Snohomish County Assessor
3000 Rockefeller Ave., M/S 510
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From: Steven Drew, Assessor <steven.drew@co.thurston.wa.us>
Sent: Wednesday, March 23, 2022 12:33 PM
To: Hjelle, Linda <Linda.Hjelle@co.snohomish.wa.us>
Subject: Re: re val letter content/format

CAUTION : This email originated from outside of this organization. Please exercise caution with links and attachments.

Thank you Linda.

Have you thought about sending a QR code folks can scan from the paper letter that will take them to a page with all of the links (live) you reference, so they can click on those desired?

Steve

Sent from my Verizon, Samsung Galaxy smartphone

Get [Outlook for Android](#)

From: Hjelle, Linda <Linda.Hjelle@co.snohomish.wa.us>
Sent: Monday, March 21, 2022 11:37:39 AM
To: Steven Drew, Assessor <steven.drew@co.thurston.wa.us>
Subject: RE: re val letter content/format

Hi Steve – Here is a copy of the FAQ we sent with our Revaluation notices last year. I believe I will be revising it for this year to talk a bit about the increases we have seen in the market over the past year. Here is the link. <https://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/336/Residential-Appraisal> Click on the second bullet (Residential Value Notice and Frequently Asked Questions) We send a printed envelope with our county logo and mailing address. We are in the midst of contracting for this year's print vendor. Last year we used AFTS.

Linda Hjelle,
Snohomish County Assessor
3000 Rockefeller Ave., M/S 510
Everett, WA 98201
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From: Steven Drew, Assessor <steven.drew@co.thurston.wa.us>
Sent: Friday, March 18, 2022 10:02 AM
To: Hjelle, Linda <Linda.Hjelle@co.snohomish.wa.us>
Cc: Buddy Stevens <donald.stevens@co.thurston.wa.us>
Subject: re val letter content/format

CAUTION : This email originated from outside of this organization. Please exercise caution with links and attachments.

Good morning Linda.

We just had a meeting on this subject as we are going from a 4x5 card to a letter. You had offered to send the FAQ insert that you send with value notices. When you get a chance please do send this over. It would also be helpful to see an example of everything you send to the taxpayer. Also, do you send a printed envelope or a plain white envelope. If printed does it just have the county logo and address or is it marked IMPORTANT TAX DOCUMENTS? Finally, are you using Masters Touch?

Thank you.

Steven J. Drew
Thurston County Assessor
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Olympia, WA. 98502
steven.drew@co.thurston.wa.us
Service-Integrity-Fairness
Internationally Recognized for Excellence
(360) 867-2202



Answers to Frequently Asked Questions



Snohomish County Assessor
Linda Hjelle – Assessor
3000 Rockefeller Ave. M/S 510
Everett, WA 98201

<https://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/assessor>



Market Sales
In 2021

Used In



Mass Appraisal
Process

Determine



Appraised Value
As of January 1st, 2022

Used To
Calculate



Taxes Payable In
2023

Assessor's Message:

Snohomish County's assessed property valuations in 2022 have seen a significant increase. The 2022 assessment will apply for the 2023 property tax cycle. Property taxes will not typically increase based on an average assessed value increase but may depending on recently voted measures and taxing districts' budgets.

RCW 84.40.020, requires that property be valued as of January 1st for taxes payable in the following year. That means that the value used to calculate your portion of your 2022 property tax bill was an estimate of what your property could sell for on January 1st, 2021. Sales that occurred in 2021 are used to help determine the value of your property for this current value notice. The value notice you received with this FAQ is a January 1st, 2022 value.

Tax Impact

Q: Will my taxes increase if my value increased?

A: Not necessarily. If your taxing districts levy the same dollar amount as last year and your property value increases at the same percentage as the rest of the properties in your taxing district, your property taxes will not increase.

Q: How are my taxes calculated?

A: Property Taxes in Washington State are primarily budget based.

Each individual taxing district, such as cities, county, schools, fire, library, ports, etc., decides how much money to levy or budget each year for their regular levies, voter approved levies or both.

Regular levies are limited to a 1% increase annually without going to a vote of the people. There are several different limits on how levies can increase.

For detailed information on levies view our levy presentation at: <https://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/Levy>

Your share of the tax is determined by a simple formula:

- Taxes to be collected for the district, divided by the total assessed value of a district, times 1000 = the levy rate.
- The levy rate times your assessed value, divided by 1000 = your share of taxes to be collected.

Q: In what circumstance will an increase in my property value affect my taxes:

A: Voted new regular levies and lid lifts

When a brand new, regular levy or a lid lift is approved by the voters, your property taxes will increase. In the first year, the levy amount to be collected is based on the total assessed

value in the district times the voted rate. The following year(s) will have the 1% increase limitation. This does not apply to school district excess levies and bonds.

Q: When will I know if my property taxes are going to increase?

A: First of the year.

Taxing districts will determine the amount they will levy at a public hearing in the fall and will then vote to approve that amount of levy. Limitations on that amount or any amount of increase may apply depending on decisions by the taxing district and state law. Specific levy rates are calculated in January and passed on to the Treasurer for billing in February.

Actions you can take

Q: This year's value increase is significant. What can property owners do?

A: Property owners can:

- Check for accuracy of your property characteristics on the Assessor's webpage at: <http://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/175/Assessor> and/or call to verify at 425-388-6555
- Check sales in the area using the SCOPI interactive map and Property Sales tool on the Assessor's webpage
- Check current and past levy rates and amounts by taxing district on the Assessor's webpage
- Check additional market sales sources such as MLS, Zillow, news reports, realty websites, etc.
- Discuss values with our appraisal staff by calling 425-388-6555 for Residential, 425-388-3390 for Commercial
- File an appeal by contacting the Board of Equalization by visiting their website or calling 425-388-3407

Q: Who should I contact for more information about my assessed value?

A: If you have questions regarding your property or disagree with the assessed value, please call our Residential Appraisal Department at 425-388-6555 or our Commercial Appraisal Department at 425-388-3390. Staff will be available to answer your questions and examine the valuation of your property.

Q: Can I appeal my assessed value?

A: Yes. If you do not agree with the value set by the Assessor, you can file a petition for a hearing before the Snohomish County Board of Equalization. The petition must be filed with the BOE within 60 days of when the value notice was mailed or by July 1st whichever is later. The appeal process does not require an attorney, but you will need to present evidence that the Assessor's value is incorrect. Appeal forms are available from the Clerk of the Board at 425-388-3407 or at: <https://www.snohomishcountywa.gov/134/Board-of-Equalization>

**Property Tax Relief Programs for:
Senior Citizen and People with Disabilities**

Q: What tax relief programs are available for lower income seniors and people with disabilities?



A: Senior Citizen/People with Disabilities Exemption Program: If you own and occupy a residence or mobile home and were 61 or older by December 31, 2022 OR are retired because of disability you may qualify for an exemption or a reduction of your 2023 property tax. The total combined, gross household income limit (including social security and/or disability payments) for the program is \$55,743 or less in 2022. For determining if you are eligible, we must use your total combined income, which is your household 2022 income from ANY source, less veterans' disability, survivors' dependency or indemnity compensation. This is NOT the same as the "taxable

income" used for federal income tax purposes. In addition, you must have occupied your residence for more than 6 months in 2022. Applications will be available in January for the 2023 tax year. Also available is a **Senior Citizens and People with Disabilities Tax Deferral Program**. To qualify you must be 60 years of age or disabled from working, with a gross 2022 income less than \$64,318 for 2023 tax year. The State of Washington will pay your property taxes, which must be re-paid upon the transfer of ownership, if the property is no longer your primary residence or upon death of the applicant. A lien is placed on the property.

Q: I already have a senior citizen and people with disabilities exemption and my taxable value is "frozen", will the new assessment affect my taxes?

A: Individuals qualifying for a Senior Citizen and People with Disabilities exemption are taxed on either the market value of the property on the date of qualification ("Frozen Value") or on the New Market Value whichever value is lower. Annual changes in levy rates may affect your taxes.

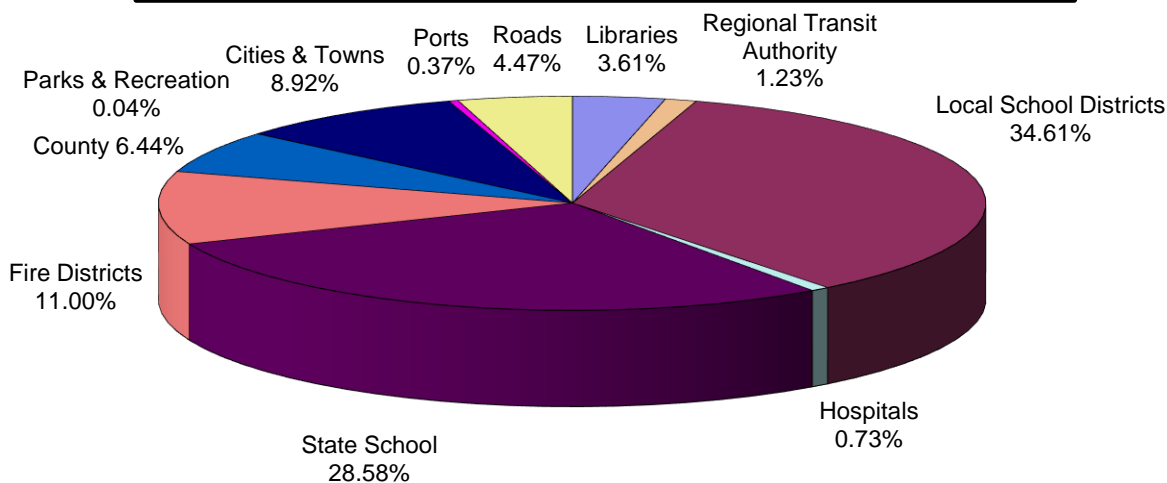
Contact the Assessor's Office

Please contact us at **425-388-3540** for more information on exemptions. Our main line for general information questions is **425-388-3433**. Our office is currently open to the public, however please check our website for hours of operation and what, if any, restrictions are in place before coming in.

Q: Can I appeal the amount of taxes I will pay or the percentage that my assessment increased or decreased?

A: No. The Board of Equalization cannot consider appeals on this basis. If you have concerns over the amount of taxes you are paying, you need to contact the taxing district officials who determine the budgets for their districts. You can also work for efficiency in government by attending budget hearings and calling or writing the taxing authorities with your concerns and ideas. Please refer to the web or your local phonebook for contact information of each taxing district.

2022 Property Taxes Total: \$1,583,621,533



IMPORTANT:

Please read the back side of the Assessor's "Official Notice of Assessed Value" for additional information about other exemption programs and special classifications