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James Ellis, Supervisor  
Members of the Town Board  
Town of Meredith  
4247 Turnpike Road  
Delhi, NY 13753

Report Number: P4-17-28

Dear Supervisor Ellis and Members of the Town Board:

A top priority of the Office of the State Comptroller is to help Town officials manage their resources efficiently and effectively and, by so doing, provide accountability for tax dollars spent to support Town operations. The Comptroller oversees the fiscal affairs of local governments statewide, as well as compliance with relevant statutes and observance of good business practices. This fiscal oversight is accomplished, in part, through our audits, which identify opportunities for improving operations and governance. Audits also can identify strategies to reduce costs and to strengthen controls intended to safeguard assets.

In accordance with these goals, we conducted an audit of 10 towns throughout New York State. The objective of our audit was to determine whether town assessors are properly administering select real property tax exemptions. We included the Town of Meredith (Town) in this audit. Within the scope of this audit, we examined Agricultural,<sup>1</sup> Persons 65 Years of Age or Older (Senior Citizens)<sup>2</sup> and Veterans<sup>3</sup> exemptions for the period January 1, 2016 through June 27, 2017. This audit was conducted pursuant to Article V, Section 1 of the State Constitution and the State Comptroller's authority as set forth in Article 3 of the New York State General Municipal Law.

This report of examination letter contains our findings and recommendations specific to the Town. We discussed the findings and recommendations with Town officials. Town officials were given an opportunity to respond to our findings and recommendations within 30 days of the exit conference, but they did not respond. At the completion of our audit of the 10 towns, we prepared a global report that summarizes the significant issues we identified at all of the towns audited.

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<sup>1</sup> Section 305 of the Agriculture and Markets Law and Section 483 of the Real Property Tax Law

<sup>2</sup> Section 467 of the Real Property Tax Law

<sup>3</sup> Sections 458, 458-a and 458-b of the Real Property Tax Law

## **Summary of Findings**

The Assessor did not properly administer select real property tax exemptions. Specifically, she did not maintain adequate supporting documentation and incorrectly calculated or classified a number of granted real property tax exemptions. As a result, we could not verify whether property owners received appropriate tax reductions totaling as much as \$26,520. If exemptions were not properly granted, it could have resulted in higher property tax bills for other residents. The failure to maintain adequate records, require annual renewals, verify and review information annually or correctly calculate exemptions increases the risk that individuals could receive exemptions to which they are not entitled on future tax rolls.

## **Background and Methodology**

The Town is located in Delaware County, covers 58.3 square miles and has approximately 1,500 residents. The Town's 2017 budgeted appropriations totaled approximately \$1.3 million. Major costs included road maintenance and improvements, snow removal and general government support. These costs are funded primarily through real property taxes.

The Town is governed by a five-member Town Board (Board). The Town Supervisor (Supervisor) is a member of the Board and serves as the chief executive and chief fiscal officer. The Town Assessor (Assessor) is responsible for granting and tracking real property tax exemptions within the Town's boundaries, including the County and school districts. The Assessor determines the assessed values of properties each year for the assessment roll (2016), which is then used to create the tax bills for the following year's tax roll (2017). The Assessor is responsible for retaining a properly completed application form and additional supporting documentation that a property was eligible for an exemption. The Town had approximately 1,300 parcels totaling \$141 million in total taxable assessed value in 2016, with 354 Agricultural, Senior Citizens and Veterans exemptions totaling \$15.4 million in assessed value. The Assessor was appointed on January 1, 2004 and also serves one other Town. The Assessor works 16 hours per month at the Town.

To complete our audit objective, we reviewed Agricultural, Senior Citizens and Veterans exemptions documentation for accuracy and propriety. We conducted this performance audit in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards (GAGAS). More information on the standards and the methodology used in performing this audit are included in Appendix A of this report. Unless otherwise indicated in this report, samples for testing were selected based on professional judgment, as it was not the intent to project the results onto the entire population. Where applicable, information is presented concerning the value and/or size of the relevant population and the sample selected for examination.

## **Audit Results**

To properly administer real property tax exemptions, the Assessor needs to ensure applicants meet eligibility requirements and receive the proper calculated exemption amount. The Assessor should also verify that exemption codes are properly selected and amounts are properly calculated in the Real Property Tax System. Lastly, the Assessor should also retain supporting documentation for those granted exemptions and consult with the New York State Office of Real Property Tax Services (ORPTS) or the Delaware County Real Property Tax Services Office, as necessary, for technical assistance.

Agricultural – The Agricultural exemption generally requires an average annual gross sales over the previous two years of \$10,000 for farms with seven or more acres of land, or \$50,000 for farms of less than seven acres. The Agricultural exemption amount is calculated based on a New York State certified soil productivity value for each parcel. Property owners may also lease acreage to eligible farmers and receive an Agricultural exemption. Property owners receiving certain Agricultural exemptions are required to file a renewal form each year certifying the property remains eligible for the exemption. Although the renewal form does not require proof of income, Assessors should periodically verify farm income to ensure the property remains eligible.

Eighteen of the 20 properties we reviewed receiving an Agricultural exemption lacked one or more pieces of supporting documentation to verify the eligibility of these exemptions. For example, 16 properties did not have income support, 16 lacked an original application form and eight lacked a soil group worksheet. Additionally, three application forms had notes indicating they were leased. However, there were no leases on file. These property owners may have inappropriately received \$22,800 in County, Town and School tax reductions for fiscal year 2017. Lastly, the Assessor does not periodically verify farm income when property owners submit their renewal forms.

Senior Citizens – The Senior Citizens exemption requires the property be used exclusively for residential purposes and owned by a person 65 years or older (with some familial exceptions), with varying income limits determined by each municipality. Residents receiving the Senior Citizens exemption are required to file a renewal form each year, along with supporting documentation to show their income is below the threshold.

All 10 of the properties we reviewed receiving a Senior Citizens exemption lacked proof of age and/or income eligibility. This may have resulted in property owners inappropriately receiving a total of \$2,800 in County, Town and School tax reductions for fiscal year 2017. In addition, seven of the exemptions were ineligible due to reported income exceeding maximum allowable limits and one was not calculated at the correct percentage based on the reported income. Lastly, one exemption was also not applied to all eligible tax assessments based on reported income.

Veterans – Requirements related to Veterans exemptions vary, but typically include that the primary residence is of a veteran (or a qualifying family member) of the United States Armed Services who actively served during certain eligible time frames or received an expeditionary medal and was discharged under honorable conditions. Towns may pass local laws that establish these exemptions, as well as raise or lower the maximum amount that a single property may be exempt from. Furthermore, disabled veterans may receive an additional exemption based on supporting documentation.

We reviewed 20 properties receiving 35 Veterans exemptions and found 17 exemptions lacked supporting documentation. These property owners may have inappropriately received \$760 in County and Town tax reductions for fiscal year 2017. We also found one exemption that was not calculated properly due to an incorrect maximum amount in the Real Property Tax System, resulting in the property owner losing \$25 in Town tax reductions for fiscal year 2017. Furthermore, two owners received incompatible duplicate exemptions, and another had the exemption misclassified resulting in \$123 in inappropriate Town tax reductions for fiscal year 2017. Lastly, another property owner did not receive a disability exemption since applying in 1985, resulting in the owner paying \$125 more in Town taxes for fiscal year 2017.

Because of the inappropriate duplicate exemption error, we reviewed the assessment roll and found an additional two property owners receiving these ineligible exemptions, resulting in the owners inappropriately receiving \$34 in Town tax reductions for fiscal year 2017.

Granted exemptions reduce the taxable assessed value of a property and, therefore, the owner’s tax payment. To ensure the Town’s tax levy is fair and equitable, it is important that the Assessor determine every exemption is legitimate. The Town granted a total of 871 of these exemptions on the 2016 assessment roll, collectively reducing the taxable assessed value by more than \$43 million. We found exceptions with 93 of the 113 exemptions reviewed (Figure 1). These properties with exceptions had their total taxable assessed value reduced by more than \$3 million.

<b>Figure 1: Fiscal Year 2017 Real Property Exemptions and Exceptions</b>					
<b>Local Government Type</b>	<b>Total Exemptions<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Total Exempted Value<sup>(a)</sup></b>	<b>Total Number of Exemptions Tested</b>	<b>Exceptions Identified from Records</b>	<b>Total Exempted Value of Exceptions</b>
County	282	\$14,211,539	34	27	\$976,573
Town	354	\$15,391,778	58	47	\$1,350,282
School	235	\$13,547,375	21	19	\$902,539
<b>Totals</b>	<b>871</b>	<b>\$43,150,692</b>	<b>113</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>\$3,229,394</b>

<sup>(a)</sup> This includes only Agricultural, Senior Citizens and Veterans exemptions categories.

Every exemption shifts the tax burden to the non-exempt properties. Therefore, the high rate of exceptions noted above (82 percent) can cause inequity among taxpayers for financing local government operations to the extent that exemptions are inappropriately given. The total exempted value for these three exemption categories is 11 percent of the Town’s taxable assessed value. Many of these errors began prior to the current Assessor’s term, and continue unresolved.

### **Recommendations**

The Assessor should:

1. Ensure all applicants provide adequate supporting documentation before granting exemptions.
2. Correctly apply statutory provisions to granted exemptions and consult with ORPTS or Delaware County Real Property Tax Services Office, as necessary, for any technical assistance.
3. Maintain documentation to support eligibility for all exemptions.
4. Annually verify income to support Agricultural and Senior Citizens exemptions.
5. Ensure previously granted exemptions are supported and continue to meet eligibility requirements.

6. Review the assessment roll exemption summary annually for noticeable errors and make necessary changes.

The Board should:

7. Consult the Town's attorney regarding recovery and the potential legal and financial impacts the Town may face from prior years' erroneous exemptions.

The Board has the responsibility to initiate corrective action. A written corrective action plan (CAP) that addresses the findings and recommendations in this report should be prepared and forwarded to our office within 90 days, pursuant to Section 35 of General Municipal Law. For more information on preparing and filing your CAP, please refer to our brochure, *Responding to an OSC Audit Report*, which you received with the draft audit report. We encourage the Board to make this plan available for public review in the Clerk's office.

We thank the officials and staff of the Town for the courtesies and cooperation extended to our auditors during this audit.

Sincerely,

Gabriel F. Deyo  
Deputy Comptroller

## APPENDIX A

### AUDIT METHODOLOGY AND STANDARDS

To achieve our audit objective and obtain valid evidence, we performed the following procedures:

- We reviewed Board minutes and applicable local legislation to gain an understanding of the audit scope. We inquired with the Assessor about the real property exemption process and record keeping requirements.
- We randomly selected 20 properties with an Agricultural exemption totaling \$3.7 million in assessed value for further testing. We reviewed the original application<sup>4</sup> to determine whether all required documentation was submitted. This included a soil survey from the Soil and Water Conservation District, if available. We reviewed any income support to determine whether the farmer met the minimum requirements. If applicable, we also determined whether the property had a current Agricultural exemption renewal form on file. If the property was leased to another farmer, we determined whether there was a current lease on file. We then recalculated the exemption for 10 of the 12 properties with available supporting documentation to determine whether the property received the proper exemption amount. We also performed an aerial observation of the property using mapping software to verify the property did not appear fallow or uncultivated. We then calculated the tax dollar effect of any exceptions found.
- We randomly selected 10 properties with a Senior Citizens exemption totaling \$1.3 million in assessed value for further testing. We verified the income reported meets the eligibility as established by each municipality or as reported in the County's real property tax system. We noted whether any record of income or age was retained. We then calculated the tax dollar effect of any exceptions found.
- We randomly selected 20 properties with a Veterans exemption totaling approximately \$3.2 million in assessed value for further testing. We reviewed the record retained in the property folder to justify the exemption. We recalculated the exemption amount to verify the property received the appropriate exemption amount.
- We reviewed the assessment roll for any apparent irregularities in exemptions granted and selected all two additional properties with a Veterans exemption totaling \$316,000 in assessed value. We then calculated the taxable effect of these errors.

We conducted this performance audit in accordance with GAGAS. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objective.

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<sup>4</sup> [https://www.tax.ny.gov/pdf/current\\_forms/orpts/rp305\\_fill\\_in.pdf](https://www.tax.ny.gov/pdf/current_forms/orpts/rp305_fill_in.pdf)