

GREENWICH TIME

Assessor Gwartney answers his calling

By Neil Vigdor, Staff Writer | July 6, 2005

Ted Gwartney's eye for real estate has taken him from appraising trailer parks in Las Vegas to consulting on appraisal in post-Communist Russia to tangling with the owners of a \$45 million Greenwich estate as the town's assessor.

A wonk in the truest sense of the word who has a passion for appraisal, Gwartney's nomadic career is as varied as some of Greenwich's properties.

"Along the way, you want to have the opportunity to do different things," said Gwartney, 64, who came to Greenwich from Bridgeport 2 1/2 years ago after serving as city assessor there for three years.

The son of a Southern California real estate broker, Gwartney said he found his calling as a student at San Diego State University after reading about families affected by high property taxes.

"I became convinced of the importance of having good, high-quality assessments," said Gwartney, who oversees an office of 13 people. "It's the concept of equity. I've always had a very strong ethical streak in me to the point where I considered becoming a minister at one point."

During Gwartney's final year in college, he really came to know the value of real estate by selling foreclosed homes for a bank at \$20,000 each, he said.

"Those houses today are selling for \$800,000 apiece," he said. "I'm just kicking myself that I didn't buy one."

A father of three grown children who lives in Bridgeport and is known to bring his wife, Toni, to meetings, Gwartney is about to become better known to town residents as he oversees his first townwide property revaluation in Greenwich.

The process is nothing new to Gwartney, who says he has overseen hundreds of revaluations during his four-decade career.

Gwartney replaced Harriet Gotz, who resigned from the post in December 2002 to start a consulting business in Norwalk. She was the sixth person to hold the job since the late 1980s. The Board of Estimate and Taxation is responsible under the Town Charter for appointing an assessor every two years or when there is a vacancy.

"I think to date he's the most experienced assessor the town has ever had," said finance board Chairman Peter Tesei. Tesei called Gwartney's varied career moves an asset.

"I think that is very attractive and gives him a certain depth of experience that I think has proven beneficial," he said.

Gwartney started his career as an appraiser trainee for Sacramento County in his home state of California and landed his first supervisory role as city assessor in Southfield, Mich. He returned to Sacramento County three years later to serve as deputy assessor, but eventually left the public sector to take a job appraising trailer parks, hotels and shopping centers in the western U.S. as a fee appraiser.

In the 1970s, the public sector beckoned once again, with Gwartney accepting jobs as city assessor in Hartford and then as provincial assessment commissioner in the Canadian province of British Columbia. In Canada, Gwartney said, he helped the province weave together a mish-mash of local and regional assessment offices and computer databases into a single public corporation.

In Russia, Gwartney provided bureaucrats, who had no system for raising taxes to speak of, a similar blueprint. "Initially in Moscow, they just drew circles around the map, and the further away from the center, the lower your assessment," said Gwartney, who, with the help of a translator, has made several consulting trips to Russia beginning in the 1990s.

Prior to coming to Greenwich in February 2003, Gwartney oversaw Bridgeport's first citywide property revaluation in 17 years.

In addition to his public-sector duties, Gwartney has taught real estate appraisal at Baruch College in New York City. He is president of the quarterly publication *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, and has consulted the United Nations on building and sustaining communities. In his spare time, he enjoys traveling and is the president of his homeowners' association in Bridgeport.

Despite his background in real estate appraisal, don't expect Gwartney to accompany friends to open houses, however. He says it's unprofessional.

"I might say, 'I'd check that hole in the ceiling and get it fixed,' but I wouldn't tell them what it's worth," he said.

Gwartney may hold the same title in Greenwich as he did in Bridgeport, but he is the first to admit that the communities could not be more different, starting with some of Greenwich's more famous residents.

"I'll tell you the house that's really nice that nobody ever gets to see is Mel Gibson's house," said Gwartney, who, since his arrival in February 2002, has grabbed headlines for his rulings on celebrity properties, including one owned by the "Lethal Weapon" star.

Gwartney turned Gibson's Old Mill Road property down for farmland status last fall after the actor's representatives applied for the tax break on 17 of the property's

75.7 acres. The assessor ruled that the property was not being used as a bona fide farm, disqualifying Gibson for an annual \$10,000 tax break on the \$17.7 million property.

"You never think about the ownership," Gwartney said. "You think about the real estate. The owner does not add value to real estate."

Other celebrities and prominent residents to tangle with Gwartney include Diana Ross, the late Citibank chairman James Stillman Rockefeller and the owners of a \$45 million Conyers Farm estate.

"He speaks with a heavy stick," said Stamford Assessor Francis Kirwin, who has known Gwartney for about 30 years. "I think he's doing what assessors are supposed to do."

The overall value of taxable property in Greenwich, which is currently estimated at \$20.5 billion and is the highest for any municipality in the state, nearly doubled after the town's last revaluation in 2001. Gwartney hopes to avoid the contentiousness usually associated with the process this fall.

"You attempt to explain to people what you've done, how you've done it and why you've done it," Gwartney said. He has budgeted \$500,000 for the undertaking, about 15 percent of the cost of the last revaluation.

"Hopefully, I am able to convince them that it was done equitably and fairly. You want to have fair assessments so that no one is paying more than they should be or less than they should be."

Several property owners have successfully challenged Gwartney's findings to the Board of Assessment Appeals and to state Superior Court, including Ross and Rockefeller.

But those who have worked with Gwartney say he is open-minded.

"I think he's a very inclusive guy and very willing to talk to anyone about the values of the property," said Jeff Reardon, chairman of the Board of Assessment Appeals.

Copyright © 2005, Southern Connecticut Newspapers, Inc.