

CUSTOMER SPOTLIGHT

STEPHENS COUNTY, GEORGIA

THOMSON REUTERS PROPERTY TAX COLLECTION SOLUTION HELPS STEPHENS COUNTY IMPROVE STAFF EFFICIENCY REPORTS THAT PREVIOUSLY TOOK HOURS TO GENERATE NOW PRODUCED IN MINUTES



THE CHALLENGE

Stephens County, located among the Blue Ridge Mountains in Georgia, is known for its friendly people, progressive government, quality schools, ruggedness and scenic beauty. Within the county, nearly 25,500 people live in approximately 10,000 households across an area close to 200 square miles.

County Tax Commissioner, Dene Hicks, manages the billing, collection and accounting system that oversees the property taxes on 17,000 parcels in the county. In 2009, she began to consider replacing the existing property tax management solution, which the county had deployed more than 20 years ago on an AS 400 mainframe.

"We wanted to migrate to a Windows-based, point-and-click solution that would allow us to do more work in less time by making it easier for the staff to process tax payments and run reports," Hicks said. "Report generation was so cumbersome that we often had to spend hours compiling reports, or else we had to call the system vendor for help, which would often require an additional service charge."

Hicks was also dissatisfied with the level of customer service the previous system vendor provided. "In most cases, we were put into a queue and had to wait for a return call that might take one or two days," Hicks said. "In many cases, we would have to

pay more for the additional services we were asking for. This made it difficult to project costs over the course of the year when it came time to establish our operating budget."

THE SOLUTION

Hicks decided to research alternative property tax solutions by talking with other tax commissioners throughout Georgia, and the partner that she kept hearing positive referrals for was Thomson Reuters and its VCSTax solution.

"After hearing about the success that other counties in Georgia had experienced while interacting with Thomson Reuters, we did not give serious consideration to any other alternatives," Hicks said. "It was clear that Thomson Reuters offers a superior solution from a technology standpoint, and just as important, they support their solutions with skilled programmers and superior customer service."

The VCSTax solution offered by Thomson Reuters is a comprehensive property tax collection system designed specifically for Georgia counties. The solution features tax levy management, billing, collection and cashing as well as tax sale, business revenue, bankruptcy case-management and assessment capabilities. VCSTax maintains unlimited tax years via effective dating while also providing extensive security, automated settlements, balances and roll-overs. The solution

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Perhaps the benefit that Hicks talks most enthusiastically about is the customer service that Thomson Reuters offers. "When we place a call, the person that answers the phone is the same person that provides technical support, so we receive help right way," Hicks said.



also manages real and personal property as well as mobile homes. In addition, VCSTax provides user-defined tax units and rate tables while enabling comprehensive searches and inquiries. The solution also automates delinquencies, tax sales, interest and penalty calculations.

THE DEPLOYMENT

In conjunction with the deployment of VCSTax, Stephens County requested that Thomson Reuters add an accounting module to the solution so tax payments could be automatically dispersed across the proper accounts and so disbursements could be handled via electronic checks. "Adding accounting functionality to VCSTax saves us from having to re-enter information," Hicks said. "And the way that Thomson Reuters responded to this requirement is a prime example of how they are willing to adapt their solutions to meet the needs of customers."

Hicks added that the overall deployment of VCSTax went smoothly since Thomson Reuters configured and prepped the system before deploying it on site at the Stephens County offices. The county then ran the VCSTax solution system and the old system simultaneously for a few days to make sure everything worked properly before switching over completely to VCSTax. "Thomson Reuters handled the deployment efficiently so that our day-to-day operations were not interrupted at all," Hicks said. "The transition went very smooth."

THE BENEFITS

"VCSTax offers everything we need with the flexibility to personalize the software according to our needs," Hicks said. "Like many counties, we are unique in the information we collect on various entities and municipalities, and VCSTax allows us to customize the data exactly as we want. We can also make changes on our own without having to call for technical support. With our last solution, we almost always had to go to the vendor for extra programming, and that would sometimes increase our costs."

Hicks adds that her staff finds VCSTax very easy to use, especially when it comes to tasks such as generating reports and printing new tax bills at the office counter when citizens lose their bills. "Some reports that used to take several hours to generate can now be created in a matter of minutes," Hicks said. "VCSTax allows us to get more work done with in less time so the staff can focus on other tasks that help the citizens of the county."

Other key benefits provided by VCSTax include automated processing of batch payments from

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DENE HICKS
County Tax Commissioner
Stephens County, Georgia

mortgage companies and the ability to provide external reports to the mortgage companies. The previous solution vendor would charge the mortgage companies for the reports, but Thomson Reuters provided the Stephens County with the ability to generate reports internally. The county now provides the reports directly at no charge, which helps solidify mortgage company relationships. VCSTax has also provided Stephens County with the flexibility to work with any third-party vendor it prefers for add-on functions such as credit card processing and Web interfaces.

Hicks also appreciates how Thomson Reuters provides any support Stephens County requests for one flat monthly service fee. "They don't charge us extra for some calls, so we always know what our costs will be, and we always know we will receive the help we need," Hicks said. "It gives us peace-of-mind knowing we can always turn to Thomson Reuters."

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Hicks said. "This is a critical benefit because when we need help, we usually need it immediately. And with the dynamic nature of property taxes, it's helpful to have a partner like Thomson Reuters that provides experienced professionals to provide support at all times."

