

dailybulletin.com

SB County supes pick Draeger to lead assessor's office

Joe Nelson, Staff Writer

Created: 07/14/2009 06:20:12 PM PDT

Newly appointed county Assessor Dennis Draeger hit the ground running Tuesday, faced with carrying out his duties with a dramatically smaller staff.

Draeger won the job when the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors decided Tuesday that he should be the permanent replacement for former assessor Bill Postmus, who resigned his elected position amid allegations of drug abuse and corruption.

Draeger, a 34-year county employee, has served as interim assessor since Postmus resigned in February. He is to complete Postmus' term, which ends in December 2010. He said he will run in the June 2010 primary election.

"I look forward to the challenge. We've got a lot of work to do," said Draeger, 59, of Yucaipa.



Dennis Draeger is sworn in as county assessor on Tuesday. Draeger has been interim assessor since former Assessor Bill Postmus stepped down in February amid allegations of drug abuse and corruption. (Al Cuizon/Staff Photographer)

Supervisors Paul Biane and Brad Mitzelfelt said they favored an open recruitment process, but ultimately went along with supervisors Gary Ovitt, Neil Derry and Josie Gonzales to vote in favor of appointing Draeger.

"I'm supportive of Dennis Draeger for the position. I think he's the right man for the job," said Ovitt, the board chairman.

On Feb. 13, Assessor Bill Postmus resigned from his elected position amid allegations of drug abuse, political corruption and the commencement of a county-commissioned investigation into the alleged corruption by John C. Hueston, a former federal prosecutor best known for his successful prosecution of Enron's Ken Lay and Jeffrey Skilling.

In March, most of the employees in the Assessor's Office signed a petition to the Board of Supervisors in support of Draeger's appointment. Chief Appraiser Dan Harp was among them and appeared before the board again on Tuesday to "reiterate his desire" to have Draeger appointed assessor.

Harp said Draeger has shown exceptional leadership in the office in the last few months - months that have truly tested Draeger's fortitude. Extensive publicity surrounding the ongoing Assessor's Office scandal, Hueston's investigation, budget cuts and layoffs have all proven extremely difficult for the office and its employees, he said.

Effective with the start of the new fiscal year on July 1, the Assessor's Office staff has shrunk by more than 26 percent from 232 to 170 because of budget cuts and layoffs.

Dealing with fluctuating property values in a time of economic crisis is the biggest challenge facing the office right now, Draeger said.

In the last year, the Assessor's Office has lowered the values of 185,000 of about 225,000 single-family-residential properties reviewed by staff, Draeger said.

The recent layoffs and department cuts have imposed more work on the remaining workers, Draeger said. Some measures to help ease the workload have been implemented, including an automated mass appraisal program that improved efficiency by about 45 percent, Draeger

said.

"It's the only way we can even come close to managing this workload," he said.

Draeger began his career at the Assessor's Office in 1975, working his way up the ranks to chief appraiser before leaving the office in November 1998 to work in the Treasurer/Tax Collector's Office as assistant tax collector.

In November 2008, Draeger landed a promotion and wound up back in the Assessor's Office as assistant assessor, succeeding Harlow Cameron, who retired.

When he was appointed interim assessor, Draeger knew his work was cut out for him, but he was no stranger to scandal.

When he went to work in the Treasurer/Tax Collector's Office in November 1998, it was as allegations were surfacing against former County Administrative Officer James Hlawek, who was involved in an elaborate bribery and kickback scheme with a trash hauler and a billboard company. It tainted county contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars.

The experience, Draeger said, helped him develop the skills necessary to deal with problems of such magnitude.

"You don't want to put it on the resume, but that did help me, no doubt about it," Draeger said. "What makes it bearable is the caliber of the employees in this office."