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New San Bernardino County assessor restoring morale in office

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By **IMRAN GHORI**
The Press-Enterprise

Life has quieted down at the San Bernardino County assessor's office.

District attorney's investigators no longer appear regularly to interview staffers and a new boss is at the helm.

That's the way Dennis Draeger, a 34-year county veteran appointed to the job last month, prefers it.

"Everything seems to have come together at once," he said. "Their investigation was ending, my being appointed. ... It closed that negative chapter. We'll be able to get back to normal, I think."

In naming Draeger to replace former assessor Bill Postmus, the Board of Supervisors cited his years of experience in the assessor's office. Also noted was his lack of political baggage, which offered a clean break from his predecessor.

Postmus resigned in February after his arrest the month before on drug violations and in the wake of a months-long investigation that had put the office under a spotlight. Last month, Postmus was charged with nine felonies, including grand theft, misuse of public resources, perjury and drug possession.

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Draeger, who had been working in the treasurer-tax collector's office, was brought back to the assessor's office in November after the retirement of Assistant Assessor Harlow Cameron. Since then, Draeger has been running the day-to-day operations of the office, which include setting property values for taxation purposes.

In November, Postmus had just returned from 12 weeks of medical leave and was fending off demands from the supervisors to explain what was going on at the assessor's office and rumors of drug use.

Draeger had been working for a decade as the chief of the county's tax collection division, but had 23 years previous experience at the assessor's office. A colleague in the assessor's office recommended to Postmus that Draeger return to run the office.

Although Draeger was aware of the allegations swirling around the office at the time, he met with Postmus and felt he could work with him, he said.

"I thought I could bring a stabilizing effect to the office," he said.

He believes that he has been able to do that. The top appointees accused of wrongdoing under Postmus all are gone, Draeger said. Left behind is an experienced staff that has kept the office functioning during all the turmoil.

Story continues below



Kurt Miller / The Press-Enterprise
In naming Dennis Draeger to replace former assessor Bill Postmus, the San Bernardino Board of Supervisors cited his years of experience in the assessor's office. Also noted was his lack of political baggage, which offered a clean break from his predecessor.

"You have a lot of professional people throughout," he said. "They were running the office the way it was supposed to be run."

Board Chairman Gary Ovitt said Draeger is doing an excellent job and is restoring morale among assessor's employees.

"The staff back him a hundred percent," Ovitt said. "They're pleased to have one of their own. He's a professional who's come through the county. He knows the operation from top to bottom."

Beyond the district attorney's investigation, the office has had to shoulder a bigger workload because of increased reassessment applications from property owners who have seen their property values go down.

The staff is smaller now, down to 170, because of budget cuts that resulted in 14 layoffs and cutting 48 vacant positions.

"We're still going to have to produce the same job with less staff," Draeger said.

He will serve as assessor for the remainder of Postmus's term, until January 2011.

Draeger plans to run for the office in the June 2010 election, though he said he doesn't relish the idea of getting drawn into politics and fundraising.

He noted that Postmus spent more than \$2 million on his campaign when he ran in 2006.

"I don't have friends with that kind of money," Draeger said with a laugh.

Draeger's only previous political experience was two terms on the Calimesa City Council in the 1990s, including serving as the city's first mayor. He said he didn't spend a dime on his campaign and ran only because he had been involved in the city's incorporation drive and was urged by others to do so.

Draeger, 59, who recently moved to Yucaipa with his wife of 10 years, said he hopes that he will be able to

run on his qualifications.

"My advantage is I'm very knowledgeable in the rules, regulations and administration of the office," he said. "(You're) not going to be able to hand the title best politician on me because I don't have that kind of experience."

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New Assessor

Dennis Draeger, who worked 23 years in the San Bernardino County assessor's office, was named assessor last month to replace Bill Postmus, who resigned.

Age: 59

Career: Began as an appraiser trainee in 1975 and worked his way up to chief appraiser. Joined the treasurer-tax collector's office in 1998 as chief of tax collections. Returned as assistant assessor for operations in November 2000 and was named assessor in July.
