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The Future of CTAS

By Rebecca Otto, State Auditor

As I stated in my last article, this month I am providing an update on the future of CTAS. CTAS, or the "City and Town Accounting System," is software developed over 20 years ago by the Office of the State Auditor (OSA). It was specially designed for use by cash cities and towns. Since it was first developed, the OSA has provided the software, training, support, and updates to the program.

The problem we face today is that CTAS will stop working in the near future. Why? CTAS is a little bit like an old tire. The tire was well taken care of: It was rotated, the pressure regularly checked, and air was added when needed. Eventually, however, the tread wears out. It doesn't matter how well cared-for it was. Some folks keep driving on the tire even after the tread is gone, risking a blow-out which can be dangerous.

The good news is that CTAS is not about to have a blow-out on a highway. The bad news is that CTAS will stop working in the near future no matter how much care it has been given, simply because the platform it is written on is old.

What can be done?

We have a few choices. We can allow CTAS to expire. Cash cities and towns will be on their own to find, purchase, install and learn how to use a new product. Whatever product is chosen, this much is sure: The product will be able to do much more than is needed; it will not be compatible with the OSA's system for uploading forms; and it will be expensive. Training, support and updates will likely not be free, so these additional costs could put more strain on town budgets.

Another option is the OSA can work to develop an updated version of CTAS on a more robust platform. The updated version will cost about $250,000 to develop. The OSA could ask the legislature for an additional appropriation to cover the cost, but with the State facing another budget deficit this session, they do not have extra funds for this type of project.

An alternative way to fund an update to CTAS is to charge a user fee. THE OSA currently has 1,300 CTAS users. We can charge each user a $300 fee in 2013. This fee would raise enough money to develop the new version, update the user manual with new screen shots, and provide copies of the software to CTAS users. There should be funds left over after that work is complete. These funds would be used to do periodic updates to the software in a timely manner, as needed. When these funds are depleted, we would charge a reasonable annual fee to allow us to keep the program going for many years to come. We would continue to provide training, support, quarterly CTAS newsletters, online recorded training sessions, and software updates to all CTAS users.

We have legislation drafted that would safeguard CTAS user fees collected by the OSA. The Legislation would require the state to set up a Special Revenue Fund for CTAS in the State's accounting system so that these CTAS user fees can only be used to update and maintain the CTAS software. This Special Revenue Fund will allow the OSA to carry these fees forward from year to year.

To accomplish this legislative change, we need the support of our CTAS users. We need CTAS users to communicate with your State Representative and State Senator about the importance of CTAS and the need to get it updated. You could explain that it has been an affordable option for your town, and that disruption in your use of CTAS must be avoided. If the bill fails to pass, many towns and small cities may be left without functioning software: An unfortunate and very costly possibility.

I will be joining you for the MAT day on the hill to provide more information on this issue. Please feel free to contact me directly if you have any questions. Together, I think we can get this done.