

Interview with Tom Van Buer in Johnson County, Iowa  
& Alveno Ross in Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

# A Modern Approach to Assessment Appeals

Local leaders save county resources after  
implementing online assessment appeals to  
Beacon & qPublic.net websites

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Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa Assessor

**70% decrease in appeals submitted**



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BDA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

**20% decrease in appeals submitted**

If you're a member of a local board of review, you know the assessment appeals process involves stacks of papers and documentation when it comes to meeting with the public to address their concerns. Wouldn't it be more efficient if all the documentation required to file an assessment appeal was bound together as a single electronic file? What if there was an easy way for constituents to perform research on local sales and land records and submit that supporting documentation with their appeal-- **on their own**? In this interview, learn how Tom in Johnson County, Iowa and Alveno in Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia reduced the amount of valuation petitions filed by using online [assessment appeals](#) to better serve their office and community.

Tom Van Buer was appointed Johnson County Iowa Assessor in 2015. Tom has experience owning and running a private appraisal practice and served as deputy assessor in past roles. Johnson County has been providing access to online assessment appeals since 2015. Last year, the county experienced about a **70% decrease in appeals submitted** compared to the number of appeals that were initiated that year.

Alveno Ross was approved as Chief Appraiser in 2010 and has been serving Augusta, Georgia ever since. In past roles, Alveno served as Chief Appraiser for Monroe County and Deputy Chief for Macon and Bibb counties in Georgia. After implementing online assessment appeals in his community in 2019, Alveno noticed about a **20% decrease in appeals submitted** compared to number of appeals that were started last year.



Don't just take it from us— read the interview responses from Assessor Tom Van Buer in Johnson County, Iowa and Chief Appraiser Alveno Ross in Richmond County, Georgia who are using Schneider Geospatial's assessment appeals module to better serve local communities and county employees. By reading further, you'll learn how to empower and equip your constituency with the tools and information to compare their valuation with local comparable sales so that there is more transparency in assessments, and ultimately less petitions filed during appeal season.

## If I were someone who had no idea about the property assessment appeal process, how would you describe it to me?



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

In the past, constituents were required to come to our office to fill out a petition to the board of review, which is not a complicated process by any means, but it did take time to do it and the applicant had to come up with the reasons why they were petitioning to the board of review.

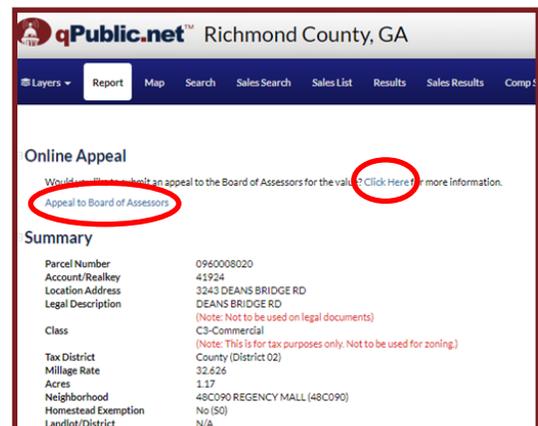
In the current system you can do the process entirely online, making it available 24 hours a day. For those that do not prefer doing things on the computer, the paper version is still available, and people can still do it that way if that's what they prefer.

The assessment rolls that we send out to the property owners stating that their value changed includes instructions on how to go online to do the appeals process. So, when you go into the Beacon & qPublic.net site there is a tab at the top of the navigation where you can complete an appeal on your value, and it brings you through the process step-by-step to fill out the appeal form.



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

In the old system, things were done mostly by walk-ins and hand-written letters; it was like the pony express and quite a contrast to what we have access to today in the digital world. We found that elevating the online appeals suddenly was a tremendous benefit for the property owner, property tax representatives, and lawyers who were representing their clients. The online appeals system granted us the opportunity to accelerate communications regarding the appeal process with any party, and I think that was the greatest benefit.



# Why did your office decide to add online assessment appeals?



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

My office and predecessor adopted the assessment appeals module a couple years before I started. In talking to the previous administration, they were trying to make the appeals process more user friendly, paper free, and as simple as possible for the taxpayer to do it.



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

We have been trying to elevate our office operations into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and adding the assessment appeals module was valid for such a move in comparison to the old way of executing this process. Adding this module countered the initial thought of people that believed and said that we would have more appeals filed; we found that to be the contrary. When we looked at all the appeals that were initiated online, only 66% of them were filed. Then, we looked at the number of appeals being filed, and the first 6 weeks of 7 weeks in a 45-days filing period, to be honest with you, had 258 filings in first 6 weeks versus 355 (just 2 multiple property owners) in the final week.

I think, for me-- it allowed my project central to execute information a lot faster, in real time, and I had management decisions at my desk; in addition to data and graphics that were available immediately in this project and available at my fingertips. The online assessment appeals module made it a lot easier for me to show that position to my 8-member board of assessors along with the movement of the appeal process.



It allowed my project central to execute information a lot faster, in real time

## Did adding the online appeals module change or affect internal processes for your office?



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

With the online appeal process, everything that the public are using for their appeal is included with their application, so it's already one electronic package. It's certainly a lot less work with an online appeal versus a paper appeal.



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

It most definitely accelerated the internal processes for our office. The online appeals module allowed us to quickly respond because of the email contacts associated with the process, and it allowed us to attach in response to the property owner the principles of our review of the appeal so they could see the data we were looking at in an attempt to defend that value. Certainly, if we concluded in that review that we were wrong, it allowed us to also show them a corrected opinion during the appeal process very quickly which led to faster withdrawals of the appeals from those individuals. The elevated process allowed us to digitize all the records, versus organizing the manual files that had to be maintained in the process previously, and that saves a lot of staff time. Certainly, with saving staff time it allows our office to reallocate to more pressing things that we deal with day to day. Of course, it saves money.



Of course, it **saves money.**

# Website Activity Resulted in NO Increase in Appeals Filed

DATE RANGE: April 19 - June 03, 2019

Total Web Visits	59,010	18.36%
Total Requests	261,674	81.43%
Initiated Appeal #	409	0.13%
Submitted Appeals #	274	0.09%
	321,367	100.00%

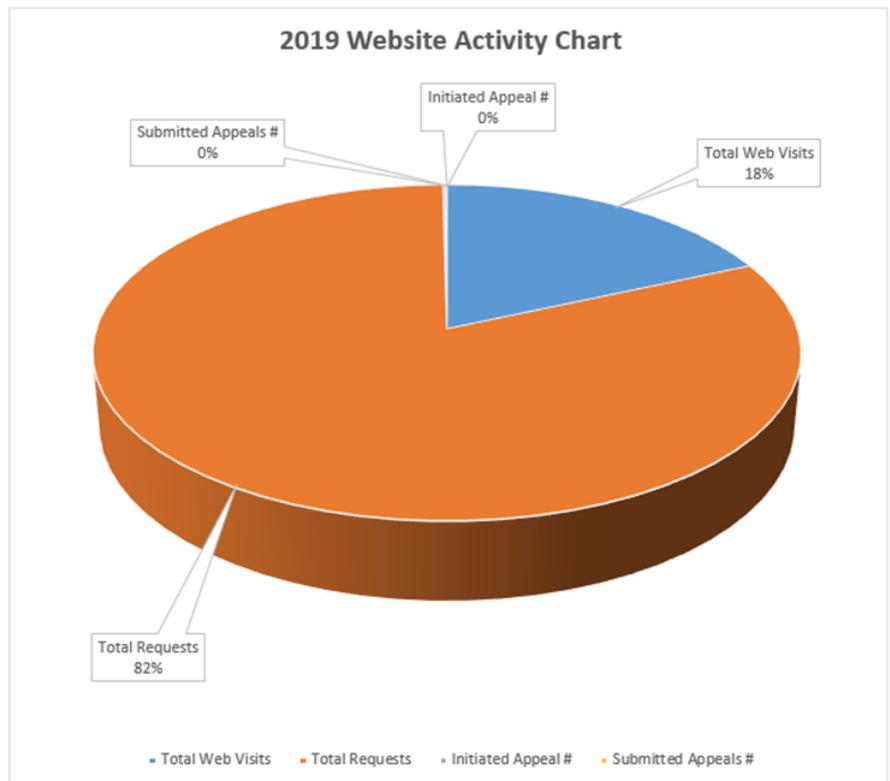
Richmond County, GA

Year	Started	Submitted
2019	326	261

Johnson County, IA

Year	Started	Submitted
2019	76	23
2018*	15	4
2017	156	98
2016	51	8
2015	139	44

\* unique circumstances in configuration resulted in these numbers



## Recall a specific assessment appeals case that stood out to you.



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

There's one particular residential property, a few years ago he had gone to the Board of Review and didn't like his results. Then, he went to the state level property assessment appeal board and didn't really get much help that way either. So then, a few years later he filed the electronic version, and we looked at what he submitted. I called and talked to him, then he came into our office. We looked over what he had provided, and I gave him some information that backed our point of view, and we were able to come up with an agreeable number somewhere between where he was and where I was. So, it helped open-up the dialogue.



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

We had a multi-property owner who lost their appeal at the Board of Equalization, rightfully so, because of the demands. In Georgia the adjustments are in [Senate Bill #346](#) which has a one year allocation to evaluation at sales lower than the assessment, they probably had multiple issues that were going on there, and in spite of the proper adjustments by my team, the constituent wanted to take this matter all the way to the superior court, so we are looking forward to either a settlement conference on the matter or we win it in court.



# Did the online assessment appeals module affect your community?



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

It makes it more accessible, someone can file an appeal 24 hours a day; they don't have to wait for our office to be open. The public can do it on their timeline, and by filing online, a lot more information is available. A very common way for people to help prove that they feel their value is wrong is using comparable sales. When an individual files an appeal through the online process, it is step by step. First, verifying your own property and making sure the information we have is correct, and then using that information about your property to compare to other properties that have sold. So, when they do that they can go through and look at sales, and that does one of two things. One, a lot of times when people start an appeal process online and they pull the sales. They then determine that our value is probably accurate. They can see how houses in their neighborhood sold. They may not necessarily like the idea that their taxes are going to go up, but they can see that yes, their house is worth what it is because how others have sold. If they have pulled the sales and have determined that yes, they think their value is high when they submit their application, all those sales that they think are similar to theirs will come to us and we can review. It puts it all in an electronic package and makes it easy for us to review.



A very common way for people to help prove that they feel their value is wrong is using **comparable sales**.



Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

In house – it allows the transmission of the record quickly to more than just the personnel we have assigned on the appeal. Frontline management can quickly be updated on the activities for our quality control purposes which helps with the organizational structure, and therefore helps those frontline people who are reporting to me on a weekly basis. I am able to easily see the pieces that my staff are controlling, see where they are progressing, and I get to see it in real-time. From staff, to frontline management, to my desk, the assessment appeals module compacts the sharing of that information really quickly, and it allows our office to function in the real-time.

Just a general reference, I have heard, “I appreciate you putting the information out there” from members of the board, the county commissioners, and many who were very pleased that we exposed that information for constituents. It allowed us to abstract the information and activity for each commissioner's district, so we could give them a summary report of what happened in their district regarding the property appeals process. Just like we update them on the annual digest totals, we also provide their governing district assessment totals as well. For the governing body, keeping them abreast helps them with their constituents, and it makes it easier for us to petition our funding—which is pretty crucial in this process! Let me repeat that—it helps them with their constituents, and it helps us petition our funding.

# Step by Step Search for Comparables

1

## Online Appeal

- ✓ Step 1 - Choose appeal type(s)
- ➔ Step 2 - Search for comparables
- Step 3 - Fill out form
- Step 4 - Attach supporting file documents
- Step 5 - Review and submit your Appeal

Start new comparable search

2

## Comparable Search

Use	Category	Criteria	Criteria for Subject
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Neighborhood	482632 TARA (7) 482634 WHEELLESS ROAD (7) 48C010 WEST AUGUSTA 48C090 REGENCY MALL	48C090 REGENCY MALL
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Property Type	Agricultural Commercial Consv Use	Commercial
<input type="checkbox"/>	Finished Sqft	Between <input type="text"/> and <input type="text"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Year Built	Between <input type="text"/> and <input type="text"/>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Value	Between \$317,215 and \$475,823	\$396,519.00
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sale Price	Between <input type="text"/> and <input type="text"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Sale Date	<input checked="" type="radio"/> 2 Years <input type="radio"/> OR <input type="radio"/> From <input type="text"/> and <input type="text"/>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	USE AS	Apartments Apartments/Duplex Apartments/Elderly Ass'd Livi	

Search

3

## Comparable Results Appeal

9 Results

### Instructions:

Select up to five (5) properties from the results below as a part of your comparable property analysis. Once finished, click Select Checked Items for Appeal.

Select checked items for report

Subject Property

Parcel ID	Address	Value	Finished Sqft	Year Built	Sale Price	Sale Date	Half Bath	Used As
0940008020	3243 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$396,519.00	0	0	\$0	11/28/2012	0	

Comparables

Parcel ID	Address	Value	Finished Sqft	Year Built	Sale Price	Sale Date	Used As
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 0962206000	3109 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$340,400.00	0	0	\$215,000	8/1/1979	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0962184000	3096 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$329,027.00	0	0	\$740,000	4/19/2018	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0962076000	3061 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$417,414.00	0	0	\$400,000	11/21/2005	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0960011000	3172 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$336,257.00	0	0	\$375,000	6/8/2001	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0950223000	3297 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$461,039.00	0	0	\$806,960	11/24/2009	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0854087010	2844 DEANS BRIDGE RD	\$390,855.00	0	0	\$350,000	4/8/2005	
<input type="checkbox"/> 0853094000	2427 WHEELLESS RD	\$345,680.00	0	0	\$195,000	7/30/2009	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 0852139000	2507 THOMAS LN	\$393,790.00	0	0	\$190,000	11/1/1979	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> 0670025000	3620 MILLEDGEVILLE RD	\$329,876.00	0	0	\$15,000	12/1/1978	

That said assessment is not uniform in relation to comparable property: Here are the comparable parcels you selected in the comparable search step.

### Comparable properties:

- 0852139000 - 2507 THOMAS LN, County - \$393,790
- 0962206000 - 3109 DEANS BRIDGE RD, County - \$340,400
- 0670025000 - 3620 MILLEDGEVILLE RD, County - \$329,876
- 0960011000 - 3172 DEANS BRIDGE RD, County - \$336,257
- 0853094000 - 2427 WHEELLESS RD, County - \$345,680

4

# How has the assessment appeals module affected processes for the office and board approval?



Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa

It has made it easier because it requires less paperwork in office, and we don't have to do the physical copying of paper or gather all the documentation for the appeals. It's all electronic so we can send paperwork to the board of review as one electronic file prior to their meeting. We put all the information that the board needs in a drop box, so overall it has been helpful.

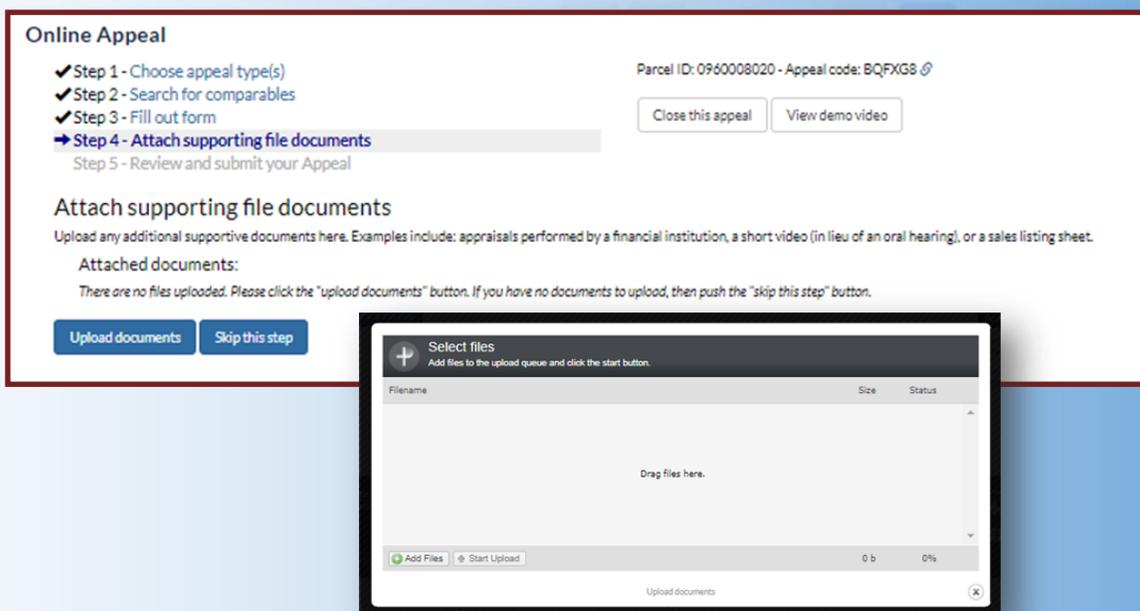


Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia

The module has not made processes more difficult; it has made things much easier for my office. We believe the process is streamlined. I think the benefit for any office is that the online appeals module forces each office to make its own decisions about the platforming, and to meet the challenges of the statutory law which is necessary. The amount of data you can draw from it gives office staff a great deal of flexibilities. When using the appeals module, I can see each of my team's performance as to what's still active, what has been worked on, and which accounts have been resolved. Then, we can refer this information from the staff back to the constituents, staff management, and the Board of Assessors very quickly.



It requires **less paperwork** in office.



# How does your office notify the public about online assessment appeals?



**Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa**

When we send out our assessment notices of changed value in the mail, there is information about the online appeals on the mailers. We also have sent out press releases to local papers and have been interviewed on local radio. The online assessment appeal is available on our Beacon website during the time of appeals each year.

Augusta-Richmond, County Results

% Return	Digest Years	# Returns	Notices Mailed
4.20%	2014	3,270	77,866
4.59%	2015	3,558	77,600
5.54%	2016	4,298	77,625
4.78%	2017	3,716	77,703
4.34%	2018	3,377	77,861
4.11%	2019	3,212	78,091

Augusta-Richmond, County Results  
REAL PROPERTY RETURN MAIL HISTORICAL FILE



**Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia**

We put the information on the annual assessment notice. Two, coming out of the gate we made it an immediate release issue and got media coverage in the newspapers and on television. I think the online appeals module will be old news to the public for the new year, but we will continue to put it on the assessment notice, and it is also available on our website on a daily basis where we provide bullet point updates as we move through the assessment process. I think just one rotation has proven to us that you don't have to PR this a lot, you just put it out there one time, and everybody is talking about it and everybody is using it. We anticipate hopefully greater use going forward as we move through reevaluation projects. I anticipate my appeal count should go up with the 2020 reevaluation projects, but the "online assessment appeals module" has us ready and prepared. As we take on more value changes, we must be prepared for the appeal filing increase and the challenge of those valuation changes. This team feels very comfortable with the estimated 20-27,000 value changes that will occur this year. So what if I get a 10% or 15% appeal rate? I believe we can work through them expediently and with accuracy, all while being able to report where we are throughout the process making the whole process much easier.

# What is the one thing you would tell others about online appeals?



**Tom Van Buer, Assessor  
Johnson County, Iowa**

Overall, I think the assessment appeals module is a good product, it's very helpful because it helped streamline the process. Adding the module doesn't prevent taxpayers from filing appeals the paper way, and it doesn't force them to do the process online either. Constituents can come in person to the office if they're not computer-savvy. Having the assessment appeals module only adds more options, which is always a good thing in my opinion.



**Alveno Ross, Chief Appraiser, BOA  
Augusta-Richmond County, Georgia**

I would say, taste and see for yourself. My story may not be your story, but I am confident the online appeals module is going to be a tremendous advantage for your operation. You will see the benefit right out of the gate. It's not like you have to spend a few years in development, it's an instant benefit. Relative to the cost, you can't find a cheaper way to communicate with property owners in what is the most significant part of their assessment process—the property owner's right to appeal; and as we say around here, "if we're not in a position to defend it, then we must be wrong."

The online assessment appeal tool streamlines workflows for the public and local government offices by outlining the petition process one step at a time. Not only is the tool easily accessible through the [Beacon & qPublic.net](#) website interface, but it is intuitive and approachable for any user. Online appeals are efficient and economical for taxpayers and counties.

It's already been proven; online assessment appeals reduce a county building's foot traffic during appeals season and decreases the number of property value protests. Oftentimes, once a constituent has viewed local sales and land record information online, they discover that their valuation is accurate, and they abandon their application to appeal. By offering the public a standardized format to remotely file legible and consistent information, office staff time spent gathering information is reduced. In addition, the time it takes an office staff member to prepare for an appeal hearing is minimized with electronic files bound together with all the necessary information.

If you're interested in learning more about the history of assessment appeal technology, check out IAAO's Fair & Equitable Magazine article "[Tablets in the Johnson County \(Iowa\) Assessor's Office](#)" by Bill Greazel. You can also view a short informational video about assessment appeals or contact us for more information at <https://www.schneidergis.com/assessappeal>.

## About the Author



**Lauren Alayza  
Technical Sales Representative  
Schneider Geospatial, LLC**

Lauren leverages her years of experience in governmental affairs, business development, research, campaign strategy, and direct service delivery to partner with the Schneider Geospatial business development team. At Schneider, Lauren is focused on public and governmental relations as she provides support to the team in cultivating relationships internally and externally.