



Waukesha County
Department of Register of Deeds
Strategic Plan
Executive Summary
2008 – 2010

(revised 2/09)

Waukesha County Mission Statement:

“The mission of Waukesha County government is to promote the health, safety and quality of life of citizens while fostering an economically vibrant community. We are committed to delivering effective, high quality programs and services in a courteous and fiscally prudent manner.”

Department Statement of Purpose: (formerly department mission statement)

The purpose of the Register of Deeds office is to provide the citizens of Waukesha County:

- 1) A depository for safekeeping and public inspection of all legal documents pertaining to Real Estate and Vital Statistics
- 2) Analyze and create a accurate ownership and descriptions of parcels in Waukesha County to aid assessors in local municipalities.

Waukesha county Register of Deeds Critical Issues

- 1) **Variation in recording volume:** Document recording volume varies widely from year to year: In the past 5 years we have had annual document volume levels ranging from 97,000 to as high as 213,000 documents. This variation has multiple impacts:
 - a. Increased document volume greatly increases our interdepartmental imaging charges, making accurate budgeting nearly impossible
 - b. Volume also directly effects our revenue stream, so vastly increased or decreased document volume from year to year will create gaps between our actual and budgeted revenues
 - c. A decrease in the number of property sales and property values over the last 3 years has had a significant negative impact on our transfer fee revenue. While we are currently seeing an upswing in volume of documents recorded, we have yet to see any recovery in the number and magnitude of transfer fees that accompany property sales.
 - d. While the Register of Deed office has continued to keep positions unfilled when the work volume would not justify hirings, the office may find itself unprepared for any sudden increase in work volume. In the past, the department has tried using temporary workers to handle upswings in document volume, these workers take the same amount of time to train as full time employees(approximately 6 months), and are generally not positively productive before they move on to other temporary employment. Furthermore, existing staff are further slowed in their regular work while correcting errors made by temporary staff, some of which are not recognized for several months after the temporary staff have left.
- 2) **Dependence on technology:** As technology has improved our document processing efficiency, we have not been forced to increase staff.. When we have a technology failure, we are reduced to our pre-implementation practices, and are unable to keep up with our current document volume. Our current system involves multiple interdependent applications, some no longer supported by the vendor. When any link in this software chain breaks, we are brought to a near standstill in terms of recording production.
- 3) **Legislative changes:** Changes in legislation can alter our day-to-day business practices, as well as our fee structure. In some cases, the ROD may have less than a week to comply with new laws. Federally mandated changes in vital records processing are due to take place in the next 2 years, but as of yet, there has not been a defined plan of approach communicated by the State.
- 4) **Employee Training and Retention:** Our clerical staff are divided into four areas: Real Estate, Cashiering, Tax listing and Vital Records. Each area requires new staff to undergo extensive training before they become a productive part of the work force. Most clerical staff are clerk I-II or clerk II and reach the top of

their pay range within 2 years of beginning work for the ROD, and due to a lack of promotional opportunity, will often look for new jobs in other County departments (typically Clerk III or equivalent positions).

Waukesha County Strategic Outcomes

- A safe county
- An economically vibrant county
- An environmentally responsible county
- A well-planned county
- A county that assists at-risk citizens
- A county that provides customers with quality programs and services
- A county that provides cost-effective services delivered with competence and skill

Environmental Scan

Financial Resources

The Register of Deeds Office historically collects more in revenues than the cost to operate the office, providing revenue to the County to support other departments or programs. The department expects this to continue through 2010.

Staff Resources

The Register of Deeds Office benefits from a highly trained and reliable staff, many of whom demonstrate exceptional flexibility in moving between job assignments.

Clerical staff are divided into four basic areas: Real Estate, Cashiering, Tax Listing, and Vital Records. Each area has its' own distinct functional requirements:

- a. Real estate staff must be familiar with all 106 document types recorded in the ROD office, as well as the functions of those documents. Real estate staff enter document indexing data into our Land Records database. They also assist customers who call in for help or come to our counter. Real estate staff must develop comprehensive knowledge of not only our documents and their functions, the land records and imaging systems, but also the location of numerous documents and bound books stored in our vault that pre-date the implementation of our electronic imaging system.
- b. Cashiering (Recording) staff must also be familiar with all document types and their functions, and must be able to critically assess submitted documents to determine if they can be recorded or must be returned to the submitter for correction. Cashiering staff must also become knowledgeable of our rather complex cashiering system and be able to prepare documents for submission to Records Management staff for imaging.
- c. Tax Listing staff must have all the knowledge and abilities of the Real Estate staff, and in addition must be trained to be able to track ownership and history of land parcels, sometimes back as far as the mid-1800s. This work provides assessors with correct ownership and legal description information, upon which they base their assessment values. Tax listing staff work with officials from all 37 municipalities in Waukesha County.
- d. Vital Records. Vital records staff process records of Birth, Death and Marriage and must review requests for these documents submitted by customers. Vital records staff work primarily with the public and with representatives of hospitals and funeral homes, wedding officiants and the Wisconsin Department of Health and Family Services' Office of Vital records. Vital records staff training does overlap somewhat with cashiering, as cashiering staff process all payments for vital records.

The nature of the work in the department is unique and entry-level employees rarely begin employment with job specific knowledge. This requires a long training period of at least six months before the employee is fully productive in data entry and customer service. Once employees are experienced and productive members of the team, they are generally at the top of their salary range for a clerk/typist II. The

department experiences periods of very high work volume and has few promotional opportunities..

The department has high standards in hiring for entry-level clerical positions because of the complex and demanding nature of the positions. At times, labor shortages have made it difficult to attract and retain qualified employees.

In recent years, special efforts have been undertaken to cross train staff between areas, where feasible. Because the various job assignments require significant background knowledge, staff must be rotated from their primary to their cross-trained duties on a regular basis. Because of the complexity of the various job assignments within ROD, no individual clerical employee is expected to maintain expertise in more than 2 areas.

This aspect of ROD operations correlates most closely with the Waukesha County strategic outcome “A county that provides cost-effective services delivered with competence and skill”: Our employees are highly trained and their work has very little margin for error.

Technology

The Register of Deeds Office has invested a great deal in automation in the last ten years and has seen a dramatic increase in productivity. The processing of real estate documents including collecting fees, recording documents, imaging, and indexing, is highly automated with increased efficiency. The addition of a public touch screen terminal for searching vital records has markedly improved public access to vital records, without a corresponding increase in the demands made on staff time. The tax file was developed by the Southeastern Wisconsin Regional Planning Commission and enhanced by the Waukesha County IT department to include the specific features required by the department to improve quality of the record and efficiency of entry. The replacement of this system (currently underway) is expected to provide an improved user interface, and a more reliable hardware infrastructure.

Developments in technology and automation improve customer service in a number of ways; by increasing access to our records, making it easier for the public to use our office to find information, and improving the quality of the index.

In past years, the ROD office has had concerns about our dependence on technology, as we have had to rely on in-house staff to maintain our unique, internally developed land records system. We are beginning implementation of a project to replace our disparate, unique internal systems with one single vendor-supplied off the shelf integrated land records/recording system. The selected system includes dynamic work flow manipulation software that will allow us to optimize our business practices to new work profiles, as volume and workloads fluctuate. The selected system handles all ROD functions, from initial recording/cashiering through image capture, automated indexing(OCR), entry and verification. The system also includes a proven online document sales component that may be added in the future for an additional fee, which is outside of the scope of the replacement project. We expect the flexibility of the new system to optimize the abilities of our cross-trained employees, and allow us to more readily adjust to drastic changes in work volume and distribution.

Our current imaging system is a keystone of the Register of Deeds daily operations. When this system crashes, our productivity is severely impacted, and our online document purchase system continues to charge customers without providing images. This system is used by several departments county-wide. We are not aware of any plans by IT to replace it. Increased dependence on technology affects customer expectations as well. Customers have increasingly sophisticated technical knowledge and expect our office to keep pace with current technology in such areas as remote access to information and ability to conduct transactions from a remote location. The Register of Deeds office currently has a system whereby customers can purchase documents online with a credit card, as well as a similar system that allows regular customers to pay a flat monthly fee for unlimited access to documents. The online records access systems greatly improve access to documents for customers who live some distance from our office, as well as remotely located title search companies. While both of these operations reduce face-to-face contact between customers and office staff, they also require periodic attention by management staff for resolution of technical and billing issues.

In addition to the aforementioned expected efficiencies in moving to a single application, the new Land Records System affords us the ability to accept Electronic Recordings. In its most common form, Level II “E-recordings” consist of an electronic image of a document and an electronic form of payment transmitted directly to the ROD office, instead of the usual submission by mail or hand delivery of paper documents. ROD staff examine the document image to determine its recordability, and if accepted, the document image is immediately moved into the Entry and Verification queue and the payment applied to the appropriate revenue account. This bypasses costly and time-intensive procedures such as mail handling, scanning, and refunding of overpayments. Currently, 14 other counties in Wisconsin are accepting E-recordings. In its purest form, Level III E-recordings bypass the submitter ever having to create a physical document, directly entering the document information via one of several acceptable submitter software packages, then transmitting the data in the same manner as the electronic image is transmitted for Level II e-recordings. In Level III, there is no image, and all the index information is submitted as data, so once the Recording/Cashiering staff determine the document to be acceptable, the data is sent directly into the Land Records System index database, bypassing Entry and Verification stages. In this same step the software creates a virtual image from the index and other submitted data, to allow creation of a printable copy, should a customer request it.

Our technology issues are most closely related to the county’s “A county that provides customers with quality programs and services” Strategic Outcome: By working to minimize system downtime and simplify operating procedures through the use of technology, we improve the security of and customer’s access to recorded documents.

Population

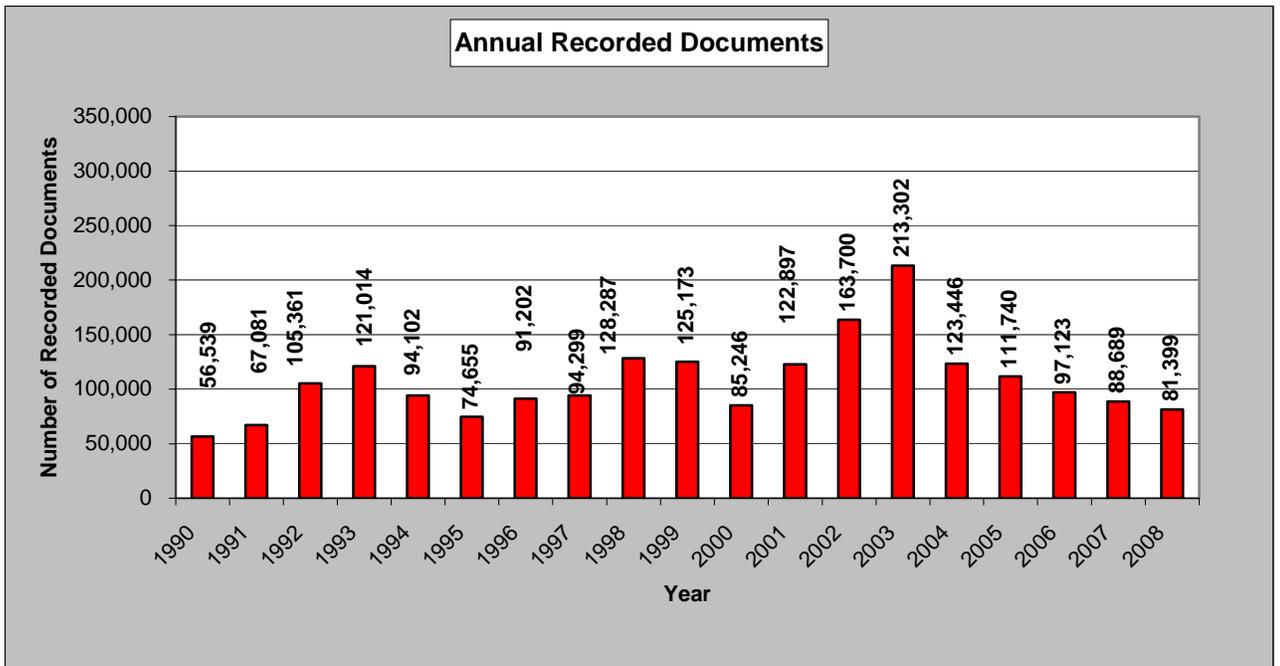
Typically, continued increase in the population of Waukesha County affects the department in several ways. First, a continued increase in the population of

Waukesha County results in a higher volume of real estate document recordings. A high volume of real estate document recordings means a higher workload volume for the department to process and higher recording revenues. Due to the recent economic downturn, the number and volume of property sales has decreased significantly over the last two years, negatively impacting transfer fee and recording revenue. In reviewing volume trends over the past 15 years, the ROD office expects the volume of recordings to increase, most likely before the volume and magnitude of property sales (transfer fees) does. We feel this is primarily due to lower than typical mortgage rates resulting in an increase in refinancing.

While we do not have walk-in contact statistics extending back far enough in time to establish a trend, it could be inferred that increasing population would lead to increasing requests for information from our clerical staff, particularly in real estate and vital records. Over the past 3 years, we have seen an notable decrease in the walk in volume, most likely due to the availability of online document access. Based on anecdotal information, it seems the online document access has decreased the simple problems brought to the real estate counter, such as requests for document copies, but has not had any effect on the number of constituents who come to the counter with more complex, time-consuming issues.

Economic Influences

The department’s workload volume is based heavily on economic and real estate market fluctuations. Because future lending rates are unpredictable, it is very difficult for the department to plan for future workload volumes. Workload can unexpectedly double or drop to half of the workload of the previous month. In reviewing the last 15 years of recording activity, the document volume appears to vary on a 5 year cycle.



In keeping with the County’s strategic outcomes “An economically vibrant county” and “A county that provides cost-effective services delivered with competence and skill”, the ROD tries to maintain the minimum required staff to keep up with our document volume. It is our office practice to consider the current workload in the office before filling any position, and to cross train between functional areas as much as possible, to minimize the impact of the large fluctuations in document volume.

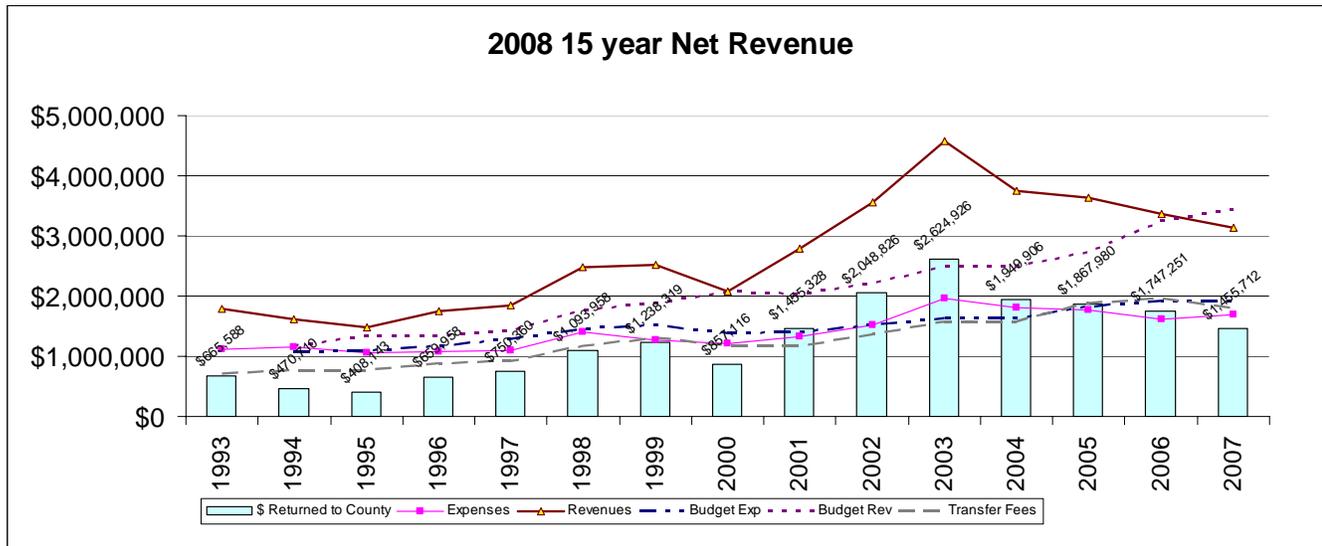
Legislation

The responsibilities of, and many of the fees charged by, the Register of Deeds Office are established by state statute. The Waukesha County Register of Deeds cannot predict and does not have control over changes in legislation that affect the Office.

Stakeholders

County Departments:

Other county departments, and in particular Land Information Systems, rely on the revenues generated by ROD to fund their operations. ROD consistently returns a net positive levy of \$1.5 million or greater. However, this amount varies greatly from year to year, in synch with the previously mentioned document volume cycle. This year-to-year variation causes difficulty for other departments, particularly LIS, as their funding depends on a \$7 per document share of the ROD recording fees.



Constituents

As the volume of documents recorded increases over the years, the department’s ability to meet its statutory requirements to record, maintain, and allow access to the records becomes a greater challenge. At the same time, demand for customer service is increasing as customers expect the clerks to provide time-consuming services such as title searches, legal advice, and research of our records to answer increasingly complex questions (ROD staff do not provide legal advice, but in spite of several notices posted in our office to that effect, many customers still expect us to provide

it.) The demand for customer service is expected to continue to increase as additional information is collected through the integration of the Land Records, Tax Listing, and LIS program. The demands on our staff will increase to provide this information to the public, in accordance with county Strategic Outcomes “A county that provides cost-effective services delivered with competence and skill” and “A county that provides customers with quality programs and services”.

The department will need to evaluate its policy on customer service given the constraints placed on its financial and staffing resources as determined by the Department of Administration. The department may want to consider how other counties respond to customer demands for information that require staff time. A survey done by the Wisconsin Register of Deeds Association of Register of Deeds Offices in various counties in Wisconsin shows a wide variety in the level of customer service provided.

Strategic Outcome - Objective Worksheet

Strategic Outcome: An economically vibrant county, A county that provides customers with quality programs and services.

Objective: Maintain low turnaround time for document recording by streamlining recording process, maintaining process flexibility and investing in reliable technology solutions.

Objective Owner: James Behrend

Action Steps To Complete This Objective:	Individuals Involved	Target Date To Complete:
1. Examine recording process steps in conjunction with Land Records replacement projects and exploit any opportunities for simplifying/facilitating the process	James Behrend Chris Crouch Nancy Kissinger Rob Dunn	Q2, 2010
2. Simplify technological aspects of cashiering/Land Records process with new software to minimize number of interdependent applications/hardware, and thus the risk of slow downs due to technological failure	James Behrend Chris Crouch Nancy Kissinger Rob Dunn	Q2, 2010
3.		
4.		
5.		
6.		

Evidence of Success (KOI, Target Indicator and Thresholds): To maintain a document recording threshold of 7 business days or less with a 125,000 annual document volume. Currently, this benchmark is at 8 business days. Increased efficiency in these areas should also improve our ability to deal with high-volume years, avoiding the recording backlog that has accumulated in past high volume years.

Strategic Outcome - Objective Worksheet

Strategic Outcome: A county that provides customers with quality programs and services.

Objective: Improve day to day ability to deal with significant fluctuations in recording volume (see graph, Page 7)

Objective Owner: James Behrend

Action Steps To Complete This Objective:	Individuals Involved	Target Date To Complete:
1. Continue/enhance cross training opportunities between departmental program areas to enhance fluidity of workforce.	James Behrend Chris Crouch Mary Gormanson Nancy Kissinger Rob Dunn	Continuous
2. . Employ a single/integrated application for Cashiering/Recording and Land Records systems that allows employees in either area to switch between these applications at their own workstation This will facilitate multitasking for employees and allow seamless switching between job assignments for cross-trained staff.	James Behrend Chris Crouch Nancy Kissinger Rob Dunn	Q1 2009
4. Simplify accounting functions within the office by employing the countywide cashiering software to move revenue information from the Land Records System directly into the County's Oracle Government Financials system, removing several manual steps normally performed by the departmental account clerk.	James Behrend Chris Crouch Rob Dunn	Q1 2009
5.		
6.		

Evidence of Success (KOI, Target Indicator and Thresholds): Reduced variation between annual budget dollars and actual operating expenses. Consistent recording turnaround time across a wider range of average daily volume totals. This can be measured by monitoring the document volume level at which our document processing benchmarks are exceeded.

