

WISCONSIN'S CRAWFORD COUNTY REGISTRY OF DEEDS AND PROPERTY LISTING OFFICE

August 9, 2004
Jeff Underwood and David Stanfield
Terra Institute

The information for this report comes from a visit by the authors with the Registrar of Deeds (Ms Cheryl Olson) in the Crawford County Court House in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin, as well as with the Property Lister for Crawford County (Ms. Gionne Collins) and the County Treasurer, Mr. Martin Sprosty. The purpose of our visit was to learn how the Registrar of Deeds and the Property Listing office functioned, and how they have been upgrading their services and procedures in recent years.

1. Background on Crawford County

Crawford County is located in the southwestern part of the State of Wisconsin, on the Mississippi River, which forms the boundary between the states of Wisconsin and Iowa. Crawford County contains about 26,000 privately owned land parcels, of which about 18,200 are agricultural, forest, or swamp land parcels. The total land area of the County is about 150,000 hectares, organized into 11 "townships", 10 villages, and one municipality--the city of Prairie du Chien.

There are about 18,000 residents in the County, occupying about 5,259 mostly single family houses

The annexed table was prepared by the County's Property Listing Office in February, 2004 as part of the annual reporting on land and improvement valuations for the preparation of property tax bills.

There are 369,299.3 acres in the County, organized into 30,527 parcels of land. Of this area about 10% is "public", that is, Federal, State or County owned. The privately owned land is of various types, including a total of 7,040 privately owned parcels classified as "residential", which occupy 10,822 acres. There are a total of 26,740 private property parcels, including 9,208 agricultural parcels, 3,214 swamp and waste land parcels, and 4,468 productive forest land parcels. There are 1,264 private forest crop and managed forest land parcels, also privately owned, but separated in the tax statistics because of the different tax rules which pertain to them.

We estimate that there are approximately $30,527 - 2,523 = 28,004$ parcels which could be sold or otherwise subject to privately arranged transactions of various sorts.

2. Structure of the Registrar of Deeds

The Registrar is elected through a general election by eligible County residents every two years. The Registrar has a staff of two assistants, although one position has been vacant for several months, due some budgeting issues.

The Office itself has approximately 2,200 square feet of space (about 205 square meters), and is organized into:

- a reception room, where the public brings in documents to be recorded,
- a staff processing room, where the documents are processed,
- a vault for birth, death, and marriage and military discharge document storage,

- and a vault for the storage of physical documents recorded for the past 250 years, plus the tract indexes and certified survey plans which describe the boundaries of parcels which are referenced in the various transaction documents.

See attached photo of the main document processing room, showing the Registrar talking with a client, standing in front of the Vital Records Vault, and her Clerk, Melissa, working on entering a document into the digital records system.

When a person brings a document into the office for recording, the document is stamped with a document number, and with the date and time when it is recorded. At present this process also includes the indexing of specific information from the document (entering the information into a data base), such as the names of the “grantors” and “grantees”, the type of transaction, description of the property, maintaining a tract index and a searchable data base. Once the indexing is completed, the clerk scans the document using a desktop scanner, with document feeder. The original document is then returned to an individual identified as the recipient of the document.

The procedures for scanning and managing certified survey plans and the tract indices in digital form are being devised. At present, these map based information are managed on physical records

A copy of the scanned document and indexed information is sent to the Property Lister of the County, where the information is used for property taxation purposes. The Property Lister also has the responsibility for the assignment of property numbers, in cases of subdivisions, and for maintaining the tax parcel maps and county wide assessment rolls.

The Registrar prints out a list of all recorded documents, including basic information about each document, every three months as a security measure. An off site copy is kept of the electronic data (scanned documents and document indices).

Prior to the introduction of scanning and data base construction in 2001, a copy of each document was kept in the archives, in bound volumes. There was a period of several years when the received documents were microfilmed and also indexed in the same form as that used when copies of the recorded documents were archived. The scanning and digital indexing is now being done for documents received each day. The scanning and indexing of documents in the physical archives for years prior to 2001 have not yet begun.

The Registrar charges a fee of \$11 for the first page of a document which is submitted for recording, plus \$2 for each additional page. Of each recording fee, \$2.00 goes into the state land records modernization fund; \$4.00 goes to the counties land records modernization fund and \$1.00 goes to the county to fund project to get the land records on the internet. The remainder of the funds go to the general County budget, from which the operational costs and investment requirements of the Registry are funded.

3. Activities of the Registry of Deeds

During the year 2003, according to the Registry data, there were 6,193 documents recorded in the Registry of Deeds, including 1,336 deeds which documented changes of ownership, plus about 2,500 mortgage related documents (a satisfaction of an existing mortgage in the name of the previous owner, and a new mortgage in the name of the new owner usually accompany each sale). The rate of sale transactions is only 1,336/28,004 or about 4.8% of the number of privately owned properties. Crawford County is largely rural, and is not near a large urban center, so the number of sales per year is relatively low.

The Registry of Deeds records also have included in the past documents relating to movable, personal property (such as tractors, cattle, crop loans, farm equipment, cars and boats). In 2002 this practice was terminated and now is done through the State Department of Financial Institutions.

4. The Association of Registrars.

The Registrar belongs to the Wisconsin Registrars of Deeds Association and receives several services from that association:

- Information on legislative changes which are relevant to the recording of documents
- State wide standardization of recording requirements.
- Consultation on problems which the Registrar may encounter;
- Experiences of other Registrars with software and other organizational matters;
- An opportunity to comment on draft legislation which requires the recording of documents, to specify the form of the documents to be used.

ALL TOTALS FOR	ALUATIUN STATEMENT CRAWFORD COUNTY				
	TOTAL PARCELS	IMPV PARCELS	TOTAL ACREAGE	LAND VALUE	IMPR VAL
ERTY A-RESIDENTIAL	7040	5259	10,822.765	67,728,266	282,117.75
B-COMMERCIAL	790	566	1,116.516	14,520,597	97,619.21
C-MANUFACTURING	77	38	567.882	2,425,900	22,711.90
D-AGRICULTURAL	9208		206,164.810	26,809,254	
E-SWAMP AND WASTE	3214		14,811.913	5,482,451	
F-PRODUCTIVE FOREST LAND	4468		71,209.220	66,001,273	
G-OTHER	1943	1901	3,005.800	5,129,505	75,637.43
GENERAL PROPERTY TOTALS	26740		307,698.906	188,098,246	478,086,296
SEC 70-114					
SEC 70-115					
SEC 70-117					
SEC 70-175					
PUBLIC LAND TOTALS					
PRIVATE FOREST CROP REG.	14		558.200	569,400	
PRIVATE FOREST CROP REG.					
PRIV. FOREST CROP SPEC.	4		142.360	126,700	
COUNTY FOREST CROP					
WOODLAND TAX LAW LANDS					
WOODLAND TAX LAW LANDS					
MANAGED FOREST LAND-OPEN	241		5,158.777	4,679,080	
MANAGED FOREST LAND-CLOS	1005		22,302.712	21,214,238	
PTC AND WTL TOTALS	1264		28,162.049	26,589,418	
FEDERAL	330		16,727.837		
STATE	831		12,700.003		
COUNTY	282		1,166.383		
OTHER	1080		2,844.078		
EXEMPT LAND TOTALS	2523		33,438.301		
	30527		369,299.256	214,687,664	478,086,299

