

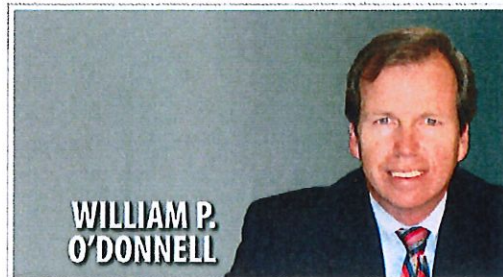
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Battle over now-vacant CIO position at Norfolk Registry of Deeds continues

By: Kris Olson April 22, 2022

When Lawyers Weekly last checked in on the status of the Norfolk County Registry of Deeds' chief information officer, the position was occupied, albeit by a person who knew his job might be on borrowed time.

Now, just as Registrar William P. O'Donnell feared, that employee has decided to seek job security elsewhere, and the registry has been operating without an on-site CIO since Jan. 22.



"Unfortunately, with my current role being temporary, and providing limited benefits, it brought a tremendous amount of stress and uncertainty to myself and my family, which is the primary reason I chose to look for and accept employment elsewhere," Richard Hatch wrote in his Jan. 14 resignation letter.

That brought to fruition a concern O'Donnell and his staff tried to raise at a Dec. 8 meeting of the Norfolk County Commission, when they urged commissioners to remove the "temporary" tag from the CIO position due to its effect on attracting and retaining qualified people. But the commission ignored their pleas.

By the end of March, O'Donnell had found a new candidate willing to serve as registry CIO, Patricia "Trish" Shropshire, but only if the position were made permanent.

But at its April 6 meeting, the commission voted unanimously to table O'Donnell's request to hire Shropshire.

Commissioners explained that it made more sense to wait for the completion of a countywide assessment of technological services, excluding Norfolk County Agricultural School, for which the County Advisory Board appropriated funds back in December. The Ripples Group was subsequently hired to conduct that assessment, and its recommendations are due by the end of April.

"I can't imagine making a change at this time until we've read the [Ripples Group] study," Commissioner Joseph P. Shea said at the meeting.

Commissioner Richard R. Staiti commended O'Donnell for "bringing forward someone to fill this important position." But he, too, counseled patience.

"It's been a long process, but we're almost there," Staiti said.

The Ripples Group study is an offshoot of a comprehensive study of the county's operations that the Abrahams Group was retained to conduct in September 2020.

Among its many recommendations, the Abrahams Group suggested ending the practice of the registry having its own CIO, but O'Donnell was quick to highlight flaws in the report, most notably a misstatement about whether the registries in Bristol and Plymouth counties had their own IT departments.

Both of O'Donnell's fellow registrars rushed to correct the record, attesting not only to the existence of their IT departments but the value of the service they were providing to their offices.

"If you chose those counties as a benchmark, that should have ended all debate, and it hasn't," O'Donnell says.

The commissioners are expected to assess the report in early May and make any decisions then as they affect the FY23 budget, with the advisory board engaging in similar deliberations on May 11, according to Norfolk County Director John J. Cronin.

But to O'Donnell, every day the CIO position remains vacant the commission is courting danger. Particularly since war has broken out in Ukraine, the Biden administration has been issuing warnings about cyberattacks with greater frequency.

Closer to home, there have been ransomware attacks on the Steamship Authority's ferry service on Cape Cod and on the Brockton Police Department, and a phishing scheme cost the Quincy municipal employees' fund \$3.5 million.

Given the \$82 million in revenue collected by the Norfolk Registry of Deeds in 2021, O'Donnell cannot help but feel his office would be a particularly attractive target for cybercrime, especially while no one is minding the store.

Even if the registry manages to keep the cyber criminals at bay, O'Donnell notes that countless people and entities count on the integrity of the registry's data to establish legal title to one of their biggest assets.

"This is hurting every homeowner or property owner," O'Donnell says.

In the meantime, commissioners continue to hear from concerned registry regulars.

"For at least the past 20 years we have always considered Norfolk County to be the best run registry in the state," Tim Quirk, the founder and president of a Dedham title examination firm, wrote to the commission on March 15. "The online services they provide are consistent, reliable, always available and fast and accurate."

In other counties, retrieval is slow and shutdowns are frequent, Quirk added, attributing the difference to the Norfolk registry's dedicated, onsite IT department.

O'Donnell says he continues to be mystified that such voices do not hold more sway with the commissioners, no matter what a report might suggest.

"I place a premium on listening to people," O'Donnell says. "I don't need any consultant to tell me the people who use the registry need on-site IT support and an on-site department."

Technically, the commission has made no final decision about the fate of the CIO, O'Donnell acknowledges. But he is skeptical that two of the commissioners — Shea and Peter H. Collins — are open minded about retaining the position.

"To me, the writing is on the wall," he says.

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