

Voice from the Vault

By Gregory Sanford, State Archivist

While most Vermonters talk of Town Meeting "Day," municipal clerks experience town meeting season. Putting together the warning, getting the town report published and distributed, preparing ballots, including for this year's presidential primary, and myriad other tasks consume months of clerk time so that the day runs smoothly. The success of the day can be measured by the invisibility of the clerk. The last thing clerks need is a suggestion for more work.

Let me make one anyway. Town meeting may be celebrated as democracy in action, but it is also, or could be, show time for municipal clerks and the records they manage. Few Vermonters appreciate the scope of responsibilities their clerk must perform. Fewer still understand the importance of municipal records to their lives. Lacking understanding, citizens are unaware of the issues, and costs, of complying with these responsibilities. Town meeting day is a great educational opportunity for informing local residents of those issues.

Here are a few suggestions, many drawn from conversations with clerks:

—have a display on the number of property transfers that have occurred in the last year or two, and the amount of money and economic activity dependent on the records that provide evidence of those transfers. One quick way to put together figures is to visit the Tax Department's web site and use their town breakdown of property transfers. Go to <http://www.state.vt.us/tax/statistics/statisticspropertytransfer.htm> for statistical compilations of property transfers since 1999.

—display the number of land record volumes that have been compiled in recent years, along with the financial amounts captured in those pages. John Cushing of Milton and others have begun to compile such lists showing the growing rapidity with which land record volumes are filled (and fill vaults) and the amount of money represented by each volume.

—display a volume in need of restoration, as well as the cost of restoration. Such a display makes a conservation budget request more "real" by providing visible, tactile evidence of the condition and costs of restoration work.

—in connection with displays, pose questions to residents that highlight the importance of the records to them as a community and as individuals. For example, ask how they would sell or refinance their property if fire, theft or inadequate resources made their deeds and mortgages inaccessible.

—display minutes from early town meetings. Whatever recollections of social studies may scar our memories, most people have an interest in the history of their community. Displaying minutes is again a tactile link to community history and pride.

These are a few, relatively simple suggestions for making the work of clerks more visible and understandable to residents. I am sure that many of you have other, better ideas.

Yes, this is a busy time of year. But it is also a time of opportunity, a time to celebrate all that you do.