



COUNTY OF NORFOLK  
COUNTY OF PRESIDENTS  
REGISTRY OF DEEDS

NORFOLK REGISTRY DISTRICT OF THE LAND COURT

WILLIAM P. O'DONNELL  
REGISTER OF DEEDS  
ASSISTANT RECORDER OF THE  
LAND COURT

## Reasons to support HB3971

(An act directing a study on the feasibility of placing registries of deeds for county government that have not been abolished under the oversight of the secretary of the commonwealth)

- **Reduces political interference from county commissioners and director with limited oversight.**
  - The court found that the County Director and Commissioners violated state law by obstructing lawful budget transfers.
  - The Registry of Deeds lawsuit revealed systemic issues in respecting the separation of powers within county government.
  - The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court had to intervene to stop unlawful interference by county officials in Registry operations.
  - Prevents county officials from making unilateral decisions, for example discontinuing the direct report Registry IT, jeopardizing the safety and security of the legal documents stored at the Norfolk County Registry of Deeds.
  - The SJC ruling against the county in the Registry budget case highlighted a lack of respect for legal boundaries and the autonomy of elected officials like the Register of Deeds.
- **Placing registries under a centralized state-level authority improves transparency, reduces mismanagement, and lessens impact of poor decision-making.**
  - The Registry's Disaster Recovery Office relocation was executed without proper planning, transparency, ADA compliance, or occupancy permits — a clear example of mismanagement and unsound decision making that upended the Registry of Deeds business continuity plan.
  - Community concerns were dismissed or minimized by county officials, including those related to environmental degradation and educational disruption associated with the solar panel project at Norfolk Agricultural High school.
  - The County Commissioners and County Director John Cronin have been criticized for making decisions that ignored public input by Registry stakeholders — for example discontinuing the on site direct report to the Register IT Department and IT staff and the closing of the Registry of Deeds Disaster Recovery Office located in Dedham, that opened in 2011.

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- **Maintaining county-level control over registries creates redundant administrative layers and inefficiencies.**
  - Critics argue that Norfolk County's current governance structure leads to duplicative costs, inefficient spending, and politically motivated decisions.
  - State oversight would help prevent future misuse of county authority over Registry budgets and staffing.
  - Follows the path of other counties that have successfully transitioned to state oversight.
  - Builds on existing models where registries operate efficiently under state control.
  - The county incurred legal expenses defending actions later ruled unlawful, diverting taxpayer money from essential services.
  - The 28 communities that make up Norfolk County paid some 7.5 million dollars in county assessments to support the Norfolk County Government that could be used for local community spending priorities.



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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 3971 – AN ACT DIRECTING A STUDY ON  
THE FEASIBILITY OF PLACING REGISTRIES OF DEEDS UNDER THE OVERSIGHT OF  
THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH

REGISTER WILLIAM P. O'DONNELL  
NORFOLK COUNTY REGISTRY OF DEEDS  
TO THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATE ADMINISTRATION AND REGULATORY OVERSIGHT

CHAIR COLLINS, VICE CHAIR ELDRIDGE, CHAIR CABRAL, VICE CHAIR TYLER,  
MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE, AND STAFF, THANK YOU FOR THE OPPORTUNITY  
TO SUBMIT TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 3971, *AN ACT  
DIRECTING A STUDY ON THE FEASIBILITY OF PLACING REGISTRIES OF DEEDS  
UNDER THE OVERSIGHT OF THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH*. I WANT TO  
EXPRESS MY APPRECIATION TO REPRESENTATIVE DENNIS GALLAGHER FOR  
FILING THIS IMPORTANT LEGISLATION AND TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE GENERAL  
COURT WHO HAVE SHOWN INTEREST IN IMPROVING THE GOVERNANCE AND  
ACCOUNTABILITY OF OUR LAND RECORDS SYSTEM.

MY NAME IS WILLIAM P. O'DONNELL, AND I SERVE AS THE REGISTER OF DEEDS  
FOR NORFOLK COUNTY. I AM A PAST PRESIDENT OF THE MASSACHUSETTS  
REGISTERS AND ASSISTANT REGISTERS OF DEEDS ASSOCIATION. I SUBMIT THIS  
TESTIMONY NOT ONLY ON BEHALF OF MY OFFICE BUT ALSO IN THE INTEREST OF

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THE THOUSANDS OF RESIDENTS, HOMEOWNERS, LEGAL PROFESSIONALS, AND BUSINESSES WHO RELY ON THE INTEGRITY, ACCESSIBILITY, AND SECURITY OF THE LAND RECORDS MAINTAINED BY REGISTRIES ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH.

WHY THIS LEGISLATION IS NEEDED:

HOUSE BILL 3971 PROPOSES A SPECIAL LEGISLATIVE COMMISSION TO STUDY WHETHER REGISTRIES OF DEEDS IN COUNTIES THAT STILL MAINTAIN COUNTY GOVERNMENT STRUCTURES — SUCH AS NORFOLK — SHOULD BE PLACED UNDER THE OVERSIGHT OF THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH. THIS IS A TIMELY AND NECESSARY PROPOSAL, ESPECIALLY IN LIGHT OF RECENT EVENTS THAT HAVE RAISED SERIOUS CONCERNS ABOUT GOVERNANCE, TRANSPARENCY, AND OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY WITHIN COUNTY-CONTROLLED REGISTRIES.

THE NORFOLK COUNTY REGISTRY OF DEEDS HAS FACED SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES IN RECENT YEARS DUE TO POLITICAL INTERFERENCE FROM COUNTY OFFICIALS AND WHO LACK DIRECT ACCOUNTABILITY TO THE PUBLIC FOR REGISTRY OPERATIONS. THESE CHALLENGES HAVE INCLUDED:

- UNLAWFUL INTERFERENCE IN BUDGETARY DECISIONS, AS DETERMINED BY THE MASSACHUSETTS SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT, WHICH RULED THAT THE COUNTY DIRECTOR AND COMMISSIONERS VIOLATED STATE LAW BY OBSTRUCTING LAWFUL BUDGET TRANSFERS.

- THE DISRUPTION OF THE REGISTRY’S DISASTER RECOVERY OFFICE, WHICH WAS RELOCATED TO A SITE LACKING PROPER OCCUPANCY PERMITS, ADA COMPLIANCE, AND OPERATIONAL READINESS — UNDERMINING THE REGISTRY’S BUSINESS CONTINUITY PLAN.
- THE DISCONTINUATION OF A DIRECT-REPORT TO THE REGISTER IT STAFF, A UNILATERAL DECISION MADE WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF THE APPOINTING AUTHORITY, WHICH TO THIS DAY JEOPARDIZES THE SECURITY AND INTEGRITY OF LEGAL DOCUMENTS STORED AT THE REGISTRY.  
PLEASE NOTE THE HIGHEST COURT IN THE COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS, THE MASSACHUSETTS SUPREME JUDICIAL COURT RULED THAT I AS REGISTER OF DEEDS IS THE AUTHORIZED OFFICIAL TASKED BY LAW AND THE VOTERS TO MANAGE THE REGISTRY OF DEEDS, NOT A STAFF BUREAUCRAT NORFOLK COUNTY DIRECTOR JOHN J. CRONIN NOR THE NORFOLK COUNTY COMMISSIONERS.
- A PATTERN OF DECISION-MAKING WITHOUT PUBLIC INPUT AND TRANSPARENCY, INCLUDING CONTROVERSIAL ACTIONS SUCH AS THE PLANNED PLACEMENT OF SOLAR PANELS ON EDUCATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTALLY SENSITIVE FOREST LAND AT THE NORFOLK COUNTY AGRICULTURAL HIGH SCHOOL.

THESE EXAMPLES UNDERSCORE THE NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE REVIEW OF THE CURRENT GOVERNANCE STRUCTURE AND A SERIOUS CONSIDERATION OF

WHETHER STATE-LEVEL OVERSIGHT WOULD BETTER SERVE THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

BENEFITS OF A STATE-LEVEL STUDY:

HOUSE BILL 3971 WOULD ALLOW THE COMMONWEALTH TO:

- EVALUATE THE FEASIBILITY AND EFFICACY OF PLACING REGISTRIES UNDER THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH, WHO ALREADY OVERSEES THE STATE'S LAND COURT SYSTEM AND HAS A PROVEN TRACK RECORD OF MANAGING PUBLIC RECORDS WITH PROFESSIONALISM AND CONSISTENCY.
- IMPROVE TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY BY REDUCING POLITICAL INTERFERENCE FROM COUNTY OFFICIALS WHO LACK KNOWLEDGE ABOUT REGISTRY OPERATIONS AND ARE NOT DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN REGISTRY OPERATIONS.
- ENSURE CONSISTENT STANDARDS ACROSS ALL REGISTRIES, REGARDLESS OF COUNTY GOVERNANCE STATUS, THEREBY ENHANCING PUBLIC TRUST AND OPERATIONAL INTEGRITY.
- STREAMLINE ADMINISTRATIVE PROCESSES, REDUCE DUPLICATIVE COSTS, AND PROMOTE FINANCIAL EFFICIENCY IN THE MANAGEMENT OF LAND RECORDS.
- PROTECT THE AUTONOMY OF ELECTED REGISTERS OF DEEDS, WHOSE OFFICES ARE DIRECTLY ACCOUNTABLE TO THE PUBLIC AND WHOSE WORK IS ESSENTIAL TO THE LEGAL AND FINANCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE

COMMONWEALTH. AS JUDGE CAHILLANE WROTE IN ONE OF THE NORFOLK SUPERIOR COURT CASES BROUGHT BY ME AS REGISTER TO COMBAT ILLEGAL AND UNLAWFUL ACTIONS IN NORFOLK COUNTY: “... THE REGISTER IS IN THE BEST POSITION TO UNDERSTAND THE DAILY NEEDS OF THE REGISTRY OF DEEDS AND TO TAKE CERTAIN ACTIONS IN THE INTEREST OF THE PUBLIC THAT ELECTED HIM.”

A PATH FORWARD:

THE PROPOSED COMMISSION WOULD INCLUDE REPRESENTATIVES FROM THE LEGISLATURE, THE SECRETARY OF THE COMMONWEALTH, THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATION AND FINANCE, AND EXPERTS IN REGISTRY OPERATIONS. THIS BALANCED APPROACH ENSURES THAT THE STUDY WILL BE THOROUGH, INCLUSIVE, AND INFORMED BY PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT OTHER COUNTIES IN MASSACHUSETTS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY TRANSITIONED AWAY FROM COUNTY GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES, RESULTING IN MORE EFFICIENT AND ACCOUNTABLE PUBLIC SERVICES. NORFOLK COUNTY, WHICH RETAINS A COUNTY GOVERNMENT, SHOULD NOT BE LEFT BEHIND IN THIS EFFORT TO MODERNIZE AND IMPROVE THE DELIVERY OF ESSENTIAL PUBLIC SERVICES.

CONCLUSION:

IN CONCLUSION, I RESPECTFULLY URGE THE JOINT COMMITTEE ON STATE ADMINISTRATION AND REGULATORY OVERSIGHT TO GIVE HOUSE BILL 3971 FAVORABLE CONSIDERATION. THIS LEGISLATION REPRESENTS A THOUGHTFUL AND PROACTIVE STEP TOWARD ENSURING THAT OUR REGISTRIES OF DEEDS ARE GOVERNED IN A MANNER THAT PRIORITIZES PUBLIC SERVICE, LEGAL INTEGRITY, AND OPERATIONAL EXCELLENCE.

I WANT TO THANK THE COMMITTEE FOR ITS CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE WORK DONE BY THE REGISTERS OF DEEDS ACROSS THE COMMONWEALTH. YOUR PARTNERSHIP HAS BEEN INVALUABLE IN ADVANCING INITIATIVES SUCH AS ELECTRONIC RECORDING, TECHNOLOGY MODERNIZATION, AND PUBLIC RECORDS ACCESS. WITH YOUR HELP, WE CAN TAKE THE NEXT STEP IN STRENGTHENING THE FOUNDATION OF OUR LAND RECORDS SYSTEM.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND CONSIDERATION.





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### Ways the Norfolk County Registry of Deeds Serves the Community

1. Launched an internet-based research system providing 24/7 access to a searchable digital archive of over 14 million land documents dating back to 1793 the year Norfolk County was established.
2. Established Electronic Recording of land documents and then expanded Electronic Recording services to include Land Court documents in 2017, enabling secure online submission of documents, especially vital during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. Launched the History Comes Alive transcription project, transcribing over 450,000 handwritten historical land documents from 1793 to 1900 from old cursive writing into easy-to-read and printable formats.
4. Opened a Genealogy Research Center in June 2024 offering free access to Ancestry.com and American Ancestors.
5. Partnered with Quincy Access Television to produce short video segments for the "History Comes Alive" multimedia project, which was developed from the Registry's History Comes Alive transcription project. These video segments have won multiple national awards.
6. Optimized the Registry's website for mobile compatibility and added advanced search filters making the site user friendly.
7. Launched a Consumer Notification Service in 2015, which alerts property owners when a document is recorded against their property.
8. Maintained full operational capacity during the COVID-19 pandemic, ensuring uninterrupted access to property services.

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9. Conducted regular Town Hall Office Hours across Norfolk County, where Register O'Donnell and staff visit local communities to offer Registry services like recording documents and assisting with Homestead Act filings, allowing residents to access services without leaving their hometown.
10. Hosted educational seminars at Councils on Aging and with other community partners to inform seniors and residents about Registry of Deeds services and deed-related scams.
11. Launched the Suits for Success program which collects and distributes to local nonprofit organizations business attire for individuals re-entering the workforce.
12. Hosts an Annual Holiday Food Drive, collecting non-perishable items like canned goods, pasta, and toiletries to support local food pantries across Norfolk County.
13. Since 2007 the Registry has sponsored an Annual Toys for Tots Drive in partnership with the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, to help brighten the holidays for children in need.
14. Publishes Notable Land Records Booklets, including volumes such as "*We Remember Our Veterans*" and "*We Remember Our Women*," which highlight historically significant individuals and properties across Norfolk County.
15. Issues regular weekly press releases to educate and inform the public about Registry services, property fraud prevention, historical initiatives, and real estate trends.
16. Developed a business continuity plan to protect Registry operations including opening in 2011 a separate and dedicated to the Registry Disaster Recovery Office.