

ARTHUR JOHNSTON
MADISON COUNTY CHANCERY CLERK

REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE CHANCERY CLERK'S OFFICE

Last Tuesday marked the sixth month anniversary of my tenure as Madison County Chancery Clerk, and I think it is appropriate to reflect on the accomplishments of our office as compared to the pledges we made during last summer's campaign. You may recall that I ran for this office because I believed our citizens deserved more **professionalism**, **cooperation** and **hard work** in county government, and I am happy to report that by every measure, we are fulfilling these commitments. Here's how:

Professionalism

In the Chancery Clerk's office, we define professionalism in several ways. First, of course, is common courtesy with, service to, and respect for, the users of the office which I expect all employees to extend. I think we have vastly improved that important area. Beginning on day one, I assigned two deputies, Charles Lasseter and Billie Jo Arnold, to work full time as customer service representatives. Both of them are eager to work with members of the public, and Charles and Billie Jo regularly provide direct assistance (both over the telephone and in person) to numerous citizens needing information or documents from our office. To compliment this effort, we moved the customer service counter to the front of our office so that citizens could have immediate access to assistance upon walking through our main door.

By dedicating two very knowledgeable employees exclusively to customer service, we were able to direct other key deputy clerks, principally Debra Dean, Holli McCarra and Temekia Hart, to focus solely on recording and indexing land records without interruption. This, in turn, enabled us to address another element of professionalism: the timely and efficient processing of land records, delinquent taxes, Board of Supervisor minutes, and court pleadings. We were assisted in our efforts by the Board which agreed to purchase workstation modules to improve the physical workflow in our office. As an example of how things are done differently, each morning before 8:00 am, Debra Dean prints the daily grantor-grantee, sectional, and sub-divisional indices. This means that the work done by our staff one day is checked, double checked and available for public use first thing the very next morning. I am delighted to know that mortgage lenders, attorneys, and title companies doing business in Madison County have noticed this improvement.

As is the case in the business world, the key to success in our office is the attraction and retention of dedicated employees. I am happy to report that we have been quite successful in this regard as well. The Board's action in restoring health insurance benefits greatly improved staff morale, and we have had virtually no turnover in personnel since day one. Thanks to veterans Shirley Cole, Marie Lockett and Cynthia Parker, each of whom returned to their former posts in the Chancery office, we have a wealth of leadership and experience to rely on and to provide hands on training to our less experienced personnel (which includes me!). Jeff Lockett provides back-up assistance at the counter and assists with the preparation and scanning of land instruments.

Our court department is staffed by Lakesha Jones and Kim Seivers, two outstanding employees who are committed to seeing that our two judges and all attorneys and litigants who appear in Chancery Court are well served. My bookkeeper, Sarah Sasnett, insures that all fees received in the office are properly accounted for and that all expenditures are legal. She also assists Judge Lutz and Judge Goree and their court administrators on *ex parte* days and provides valuable bookkeeping services for the county's accounts payable department. Also, it has been my honor to have Danielle Brown, the Valedictorian of the 2004 Senior Class at Velma Jackson High School as well as another bright VJHS student, Brittany Evans, to serve as interns in my office through a grant funded by the Central Mississippi Planning and Development District.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly where professionalism is concerned, I was quite pleased when the Board of Supervisors asked me to recommend candidates for the position of County Comptroller. Because the Chancery Clerk has statutory responsibility for all county finances, a highly competent, experienced governmental accountant was essential to the success of this aspect of the job. Mark Houston, a CPA and fellow DSU alum, was my hands-down pick for this position, and the Board agreed. Mark brings twenty (20) years of experience in the State Auditor's office to Madison County, during the last ten (10) of which he served as Manager of the Technical Assistance Division. In that capacity, Mark had responsibility for giving guidance and advice on a daily basis to Chancery Clerks, County Administrators and Comptrollers **all across Mississippi** concerning the uniform system of accounts and the legalities and details of county government finance. I can say without question that there could be no finer choice for Comptroller! And there can be no doubt about the message of professionalism that his hiring sends to the citizens of the county and the rest of the state.

Cooperation

I was and remain personally committed to bringing cooperation to the entirety of county government. In this regard, I am happy to report that the relationship between the Board of Supervisors and the Chancery Clerk has improved 100%. I religiously prepare the Board minutes and confer daily with Board President Doug Jones – and at least weekly with every other supervisor – on virtually all matters of importance affecting county government. Board Attorney Eddie Brunini makes my office his office on Board meeting days, and Sheriff Toby Trowbridge and his staff have gone out of their way to assist our office, especially in serving delinquent tax notices without receiving advance payment of his statutory fees.

I have also enjoyed a strong working relationship with other elected officials in the county, including, particularly, Tax Collector Kay Pace and Tax Assessor Gerald Barber. Each of them has years of experience in their respective positions, and I have learned quite a bit from them. Last month, I initiated a monthly roundtable meeting in which just the three of us review items pertaining to the tax roll and other matters of common concern to our offices. Our aim is to clean up and improve the roll itself and, more importantly, to improve the experience of citizens in their dealings with county government. Circuit Clerk Lee Westbrook has been a wonderful friend and confidant, and Superintendent of Schools Mike Kent and his staff have also been extremely helpful as I continue to get my feet on the ground. I also enjoy a strong working relationship with our District

Attorney, David Clark. I have the highest regard for – and extend my compliments to – each of these officials. They do an outstanding job.

As it is to every citizen, my office is always open to Board members, other county officials and department heads, and it is not uncommon at all to find one or more of them in my office at anytime seeking input and advice on just about anything. I am delighted that they have that level of confidence in me.

I also initiated weekly executive staff meetings with the County Administrator, the Comptroller and myself, together with the other elected officials and all department heads. This valuable weekly session has improved communication between all offices of county government and helps to insure that everyone works together. It also provides a basis for county leaders to benefit from each other's training, background and experience.

County Administrator Donnie Caughman and I confer regularly on a host of issues, and he, Comptroller Mark Houston and I are very much a team when it comes to managing the day-to-day affairs of county government. I am honored to work with men of their character, knowledge and abilities, and we are fortunate to have both of them in Madison County.

As further evidence of the spirit of cooperation that I think I have helped bring to county government, the Board has recently seen fit to appoint me to serve on a committee, along with the County Administrator and the Comptroller, to mediate the differences between the Board and the Madison County Economic Development Authority (MCEDA). This appointment may very well be the most challenging task my office has faced so far, but I remain committed to the notion that a solution can be derived.

Hard Work

The first several months on the job were extremely difficult. However, after the first tiresome week we were able to erase a substantial backlog of work, and, since that time, the land records which have arrived in our office one day have been recorded, indexed and placed in the mail on their way to their rightful owner **that same day – a one day turn around!** Many people told me this could not be done in a month much less a week. Well, we did it! Unfortunately, though, I can take very little credit for this accomplishment. I owe it all to the loyalty and incredible work ethic which each member of my staff has demonstrated. They come to work every day committed to the notion that the office will do its job -- and that I will look good in the process. I am forever in their debt.

Here, I must take a moment and report on the outstanding work performed by Ms. Shirley Cole. In addition to serving part time on my staff as Director of Land Records, the Board contracted with Ms. Cole to perform a review of all real property instruments filed between May 1, 2002 and December 31, 2003 and report on and correct any recording or indexing errors she discovered. She was also charged with evaluating the physical condition of the county's land records and making recommendations to rectify any deficiencies. It was my thought that this work could be

accomplished in three to six months. I was wrong. She began with the month of December 2003 and worked backwards. She's just now moved into October 2003, and we have encountered so many errors that, unfortunately, the process will continue to be drawn out. As of June 30, 2004, Ms. Cole has found and corrected errors in 1,580 instruments out of a total of 5,864 reviewed so far (almost one out of every four).¹ Though the process is slow, because of the high level, high quality and high price of real estate development in Madison County, and because of the vital role that real estate plays in our economy, I believe the county has no choice but to continue Ms. Cole's systematic review and clean up of our county land records filed during this difficult period of time.

Mrs. Cole's initial work with regard to the physical condition of our records resulted in the Board recently adding almost \$6,000 to the budget of our office for records restoration. She has also identified 31 deed books and 34 deed of trust books which are in need of repair or replacement. Thus, though I anticipate that more funding in this area will be needed in the upcoming fiscal year, I can assure you that we will be good stewards of these resources.

My staff and I have quietly put in long hours of tedious and often very difficult work. As my wife will attest, I spend most weekends and many evenings writing and editing Board Minutes, reviewing difficult court matters, and addressing a myriad of issues ranging from delinquent tax payments, to processing homestead exemption applications, to preparing various reports to the State Tax Commission and other state and federal agencies. Many of my staff members put in similar hours when the need arises. We will continue to do so.

Where do we go from here?

More than all this, you may recall that we also promised that Madison County would be **an example for the rest of Mississippi on how to conduct the affairs of county government**. That meant that just doing our job wasn't going to be good enough. We said excellence would be the standard. While we have made substantial strides toward fulfilling the promise of excellence, we still have much work to do in this regard. Here are some examples:

Our computer system must and will be upgraded. We have undergone two extensive computer audits in conjunction with audits of the county-wide computer system(s), and from them we know we have a great deal of work to do on this front. It is essential that the public have a user friendly interface with our computerized indices and land record images, and we must improve our printing and imaging capability. In addition, my goal is to provide fully searchable indices on the web as well as full access to all land records on the web. Long term, it is my hope that a standard thirty-two (32) year title search can be reliably performed completely online. We will need substantial financial support from the Board and continued patience from the public as we pursue these improvements.

¹This is not meant as an indictment of any former clerk or his staff. A lack of training and high rate of turnover, together with a difficult environment created by the controversy between the former Board and the Chancery office, as well as other factors, all contributed to the problem.

We also have additional work to do to improve the searchability of our Board minutes. Although they are presently available on the county's website, they are not easily searchable in that form, and while we have organized and filed the "hard" copies of the Minutes back through 2002 and have reviewed them for integrity, we still need to take further organizational and technological steps to improve their usefulness.

Additionally, I said I would organize a Chancery Clerk users' group to provide me with advice and suggestions on further improvements. I haven't done it yet, but we are in the process of putting it together, and we will be having a meeting very shortly.

Perhaps most importantly, we must continue to efficiently, effectively and professionally handle all matters which come before our office. As we go forward, I pledge to do just that.

It has been my honor to serve as your Chancery Clerk for the past six months. Please come by for a cup of coffee and see for yourself the improvements we have made – and hold me accountable for the continued improvements that you have the right to expect.

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