



**Chester County Recorder of Deeds Candidate Interview**  
**Russ Phifer**

1. Why are you running as a candidate for Recorder of Deeds?

Everything came together at once to say that if I'm going to run for public office, this is the time. The office is vacant right now. I am familiar with the operations of the Recorder's office; I've been using their services on a regular basis for over 20 years. I've also performed title searches in many other counties, and can see what they're doing right that we aren't doing in Chester County. While there have clearly been improvements over the years, it's evident that previous Recorders have not made management of this office a full time effort. I am prepared to make that effort.

2. How has your educational background and work experience made you the best candidate for the office?

I received my real estate license in 1999 solely to improve my knowledge of real estate law and procedures. This has helped considerably in my environmental consulting business, where land records are an important focus. I have had my own business for over 20 years, and am familiar with the challenges of running an office and providing excellent customer service. My business has required literally hundreds of title searches and real estate assessments, taking me to every township and municipality in the County. I do not know how you could possibly do this job without a thorough knowledge of land records and how real estate transactions take place.

3. What are the most pressing issues facing the Recorder of Deeds office and what are your plans to address them?

Customer service is the first priority. As a property owner as well as someone who uses the office frequently, I know its shortcomings. For example, the ROD office does not maintain records or copies of service requests. They do not take credit cards. They do not take personal checks from individuals. This leads to additional effort to have any document recorded, as a certified check or money order is generally necessary to pay for service. There have been numerous complaints regarding this practice. There are clear issues with electronic database management in the office that need to be addressed. Again, this is a customer service office that should be serving the needs of the real estate market and the property owners of the County. While there are good, experienced people in the office, there also needs to be good management. The evidence suggests this has been sorely lacking.

I am also concerned with the quality of title searches being performed by large abstract companies. I realize that cost is important, but all evidence suggests the majority of these searches are being performed overseas. As recently as five years ago, there were thirty independent title searchers in the county. Today, there are seven, and they have little work because they can't compete with the cost of labor in India. This is not beneficial to the job market in Chester County, and if a settlement needs to be delayed because of faulty information it becomes an issue for Realtors as well. Abuses of the public information database systems are responsible for these problems. This is not an issue in Delaware County, for instance, where there are over twenty active, local title searchers. To summarize - a good, hard look at how data is managed is needed, and this should be the responsibility of the Recorder of Deeds.

4. In terms of the 2012 county budget, how will you ensure that the Recorder's office remains funded at a level that supports the continued availability and accuracy of real estate records in the county? Are there ways that operations in the recorder's office can be streamlined and made more efficient without sacrificing the quality of the end product?

The Office has a personnel and operating budget of a little over 1.5 million dollars, with anticipated revenues in 2011 of over \$3.6 million. Over 80% of the budget is for personnel, as this is a labor-intensive office. The best way to assure an adequate budget is to look at revenues. Anticipated revenues in 2011 are less than half what they were just seven years ago. While much of this is due to the down state of the real estate market, some is also due to how the office is managed and the nature of the revenue stream. While the fees for most services are comparable to other counties, there are opportunities to increase funding without cost to the property owners or at the expense of real estate transactions. For example, there is no provision for electronic certification of documents. Currently, certification costs nothing more than the copying fee, but it requires a visit to the ROD office in West Chester and all that entails (driving, parking, etc.). In Montgomery County, a resident (or Realtor) can pay a modest \$5.00 fee and get that same document certified electronically and downloaded to their home or office. Chester County should be offering this as a fee-based service; most users would gladly pay a few dollars to save themselves the time, effort and cost of a visit to the office in West Chester.

Pennsylvania realtors are clearly against high fees for recording documents due to the potential impact on the real estate market. I agree with this point completely. However, these fees are not going to go away. Most are the direct result of legislative action over which the Recorder of Deeds has no control. The objective of one of these fees – the County Records Improvement Fund – is to fund improvements to recording systems. The law provides for a \$5.00 “tax” on document filings, which has raised hundreds of thousands of dollars in Chester County. Unfortunately, previous Recorders have not made a sincere effort to actually use these funds to improve operations. Instead, they have either returned the money untouched to the County or spent it on such activities as restoring old deeds, as they did in 2010. While it is certainly a nice idea to properly maintain historical records, I'm not sure that spending \$174,000 was the best use of these funds. Instead, the focus should be on improving the databases. Right now, there are three separate databases for access to real estate records – iCRIS, iCRIS+, and ChescoPIN. There seems to be some duplication.

Better database management will take a burden off of the office staff and make working with the office easier and more efficient.

5. Are there best deed-recording practices in other counties around the country that should be considered for Chester County?

The Chester County Recorder of Deeds webpage has touted a “new” Eagle Recording System for over a year now, indicating it is “coming soon”. While indications it will be a state of the art system, the delays in implementation don't bode well for a smooth transition. Hopefully whatever issues are holding it up will be settled soon. While there are other counties who are faster at recording documents than Chester, I believe the experience of the employees is equally



important. Chester County is fortunate in having many long-time employees in the ROD office who know their jobs and do them well. As to what happens after documents are recorded and access is needed, I do like the concept of the iCRIS system. As noted, it is important that the various databases be streamlined and made more efficient and user-friendly.

6. Have you been endorsed by any political party or organization?

I have the endorsement and nomination of the Democratic Party. I have not gone after endorsements – the only endorsement I’m interested in is yours, because ultimately it is real estate professionals who dictate the usefulness of the Recorder of Deeds office.

7. Why should a REALTOR® vote for you?

I have worked with literally hundreds of realtors in southeast Pennsylvania, including many who work in Chester County. I am interested in being Recorder of Deeds because I care about this office for what it is – the exclusive manager of land records in the County. I believe that I can bring strengths to the office. As a long-time resident of Chester County, I love living and working here. I am a proven leader, having held leadership positions at the local, county, and national level on numerous committees and boards. The awards I’ve received for my work speak for themselves. I work well with others and can effectively manage projects large as well as small. I am making a commitment to attain this office and make it all it can be for the benefit of the real estate market and the residents of Chester County.