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December 6, 2003

Electronic registration means more paper

But the new recording system takes less time

Title searches simplified on one or two pages

Next week marks an important milestone for property owners and real estate lawyers in Toronto.

Starting Tuesday, for the first time in more than 200 years, it will no longer be possible to register hand-signed, paper versions of standard real estate documents like deeds, mortgages, and discharges at the Toronto land registry office.

In the "old" days before September, 2002 lawyers, or their staff, had to go in person to the three Toronto Land Registry Offices to close real estate transactions. Over the large tables in the public portions of the offices, documents, money and keys were exchanged just before the parties marched up to the registration counter to have the office staff check, number and finally stamp the documents to verify registration.

All this originally took place at the beautiful old Registry Office building, which sat just west of where city hall is now.

Around 1964, it was torn down, and the Toronto land registry offices moved into the new city hall. When the lease ran out and the city needed the space for other purposes in the mid-'80s, the offices consolidated at the Atrium on Bay on Dundas St. Eventually, the office will shrink in size and most of it will reside on a computer server in the Teranet offices at Yonge and Adelaide Sts.

I vividly remember that title searches in the pre-electronic days were conducted by wading through massive hand-written volumes to trace property history back for a 40-year period. The recording system was so antiquated and chaotic that some searches literally took days to complete. I know, because I did more than a few of them.

In many places in Ontario where the offices still use paper records, some titles are still problematic due to sloppy conveyancing and surveying over the years.

Today, title searches in the electronic land registries are simplified on one or two pages (plus supporting documents) and show little or no history before the current owners.

After most of the counties surrounding Toronto went electronic after 1999, voluntary electronic registration of title documents came into effect here in 2002. Known as e-reg, it was accepted by real estate lawyers and others very quickly (if grudgingly in some cases). Most Toronto users already had experience with it in surrounding jurisdictions, including Peel, York, Durham and Halton.

In the past 15 months, almost 90 per cent of all land title documents in Toronto were registered electronically. Starting Tuesday, virtually 100 per cent will have to be registered electronically, since there is no paper alternative. It seems clear that users of the Toronto system are ready for mandatory e-reg.

To date, more than 2.2 million documents have been registered electronically in Ontario, with one-quarter of them in Toronto. The highest daily volume was almost 16,000 documents on Aug. 30 this year. In October, 137,218 documents were registered, setting a monthly record.

Today, more than 70 per cent of all provincial land registrations take place online. The busiest 27 of the 55 land registry offices in the province have now been automated, with Rainy River, Sudbury and Thunder Bay next on the list.

The computerization of Ontario's 4 million land registry records is a project of Teranet Inc., a private company owned by Teramira Holdings Inc., with annual revenues exceeding \$170 million. Through its Teraview software, lawyers and other system users can search title records, register documents and conduct searches for court judgments (executions) all online.

Unfortunately, the paperless law office is still an impossible dream. The electronic registry system has actually meant more paper for lawyers, not less. In the paper system, lawyers prepared one deed, had it signed in ink, and then registered. Now e-reg users have to print out an authorization and direction from the client to permit the document to be registered electronically; as well as a draft copy of the electronic document, and then a paper copy of the electronic document as registered.

Three paper documents are now required where only one was necessary in the past. Such is progress my files are thicker and my paper costs higher.

Lawyers have to warehouse the signatures in their own files forever to prove client authorization, if necessary, at any future date.

Today's registry offices bear no resemblance to the Ontario land registries of 1799 and 1899, and very little to the same offices in 1999. It's a whole new world at today's virtual land registry offices.