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Economy, bad budget produce setbacks

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The sheriff's civil division has piles of papers awaiting service.

WARREN — Two bad economies have joined forces to put several hundred financial transactions on hold in Trumbull County.

Economic realities of the Mahoning Valley, coupled with the county sheriff's department's own budget issues, have resulted in an eight-month backlog for sheriff's sales, or about 800 transactions.

In addition, there are some 100 civil process papers waiting to be served.

The backlog affects property holders, lending institutions and lawyers, among others.

"There are a lot of stakeholders there who are getting shortchanged," said Ernie Cook, chief deputy. "The creditors don't get paid off as soon as they should, the lending institutions don't get their money as quick as they should."

Sheriff's sales

In today's economy there are more and more foreclosures on homes and businesses. In the early 1990s, the sheriff's civil division handled 15 to 20 sheriff's sales monthly on the ground floor of the county courthouse; that number is about 100 a month now.

"They are coming in by buckets," agreed Sophie Rintala, civil office coordinator, pointing to a pile of sale paperwork stacked in the corner of her staff's cramped office.

Foreclosures usually occur when a borrower, unable to meet mortgage payments, defaults on a loan. Foreclosed homes are auctioned at sheriff's sales.

The busier the county's courts are with foreclosures, the busier the civil office is. As the workload has increased since the early 1990s, the sheriff's civil division has seen its staff trimmed to six deputies instead of 11.

Two deputies Thursday were minding the office. Others were on duties that often involve transporting people or providing security — which holds up the work to prepare for a sheriff's sale: typing deeds, cutting checks, arranging advertising, getting appraisers.

"You don't just stand down there and sell them," Rintala noted. "Banks are really getting ticked off, because they don't understand why it's taking so long from the point where we get it to where we sell it."

Most of the mortgage companies involved in these foreclosures, she noted, are not local. "They don't want to hear about 'staffing' and 'put the tax on.' They're not from here."

For every property sold at sheriff's sale the sheriff's department gets \$121 plus 1.5 percent of the selling price, unless the lending institution that's foreclosing buys it. In that case, the department gets only the \$121.

A study this year by Policy Matters Ohio, a Cleveland-based research institute, said foreclosures in Trumbull County spiked by 24 percent between 2001 and 2003.

Statewide in 2003, 57,083 new foreclosure filings were made in Ohio courts, up 3 percent from a year earlier, up 31 percent from 2001 and more than double the number in 1998, according to the study. County sheriffs' departments put more than 36,425 foreclosed properties up for sale. That represents a 26 percent increase from 2002 and a 57 percent increase from just two years earlier.

The number of properties put up for sale last year represented about one in every 117 Ohio households. That compares with one out of every 185 households in 2001.

A survey of sheriffs' departments statewide primarily blamed a weak economy and so-called predatory lending as major contributors to the spike statewide.

Backlogs

The 100 civil process papers on hold in Trumbull County, meanwhile, involve writs of execution, writs of possession and immediate orders. "Some of these have expired and we have been unable to serve them," Cook said.

The backlogs are just part of the picture that will be presented to county commissioners as Sheriff Thomas Altieri's department tries to make a case for its 2005 budget, which Cook hopes to keep "flat" at \$9 million, like this year. That's \$6 million for the jail and \$3 million

for the civil division and road patrols, he noted.

Trumbull County's budget is expected go from about \$38 million to about \$32 million because of the loss of a 12-month, half-percent county sales tax defeated by voters in November 2003. It stopped being collected April 1. The county still has a permanent half-percent sales tax.

The sheriff's department, Cook explained, is the primary law enforcement agency in parts of the county where there are part-time forces or no police departments. That's about 50,000 people in a 400-square-mile area, he noted, covered by two to three people per shift.

"When it gets to that point, you can't cut any more," he said, stressing the department's roster has 32 openings that he is not asking to fill.

"We cannot possibly take any more cuts without a catastrophic impact on the office of the sheriff."

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