



Wednesday, June 13, 2007

County ready to help with passports

BY GREG HARTMANN | GUEST COLUMNIST

It is the latest example of big government at its worst. The U.S. State Department's handling of the recent passport logjam is a disgrace.

As clerk of courts, my office is federally recognized as a location to file for a U.S. passport. We're proud to offer "one stop" passport application services onsite at our main office, or at any one of our three satellite offices, around Hamilton County. You can have your photo taken, complete federal paperwork and pay your fees all at once, at an office conveniently located near your home or business.

As an elected official, I know that it is my responsibility to offer the best customer service possible to our taxpayers. As a taxpayer myself, I expect the same treatment whether I'm in Cincinnati or in Washington. But geography is not the problem here.

In January, new government rules took effect that required U.S. citizens to obtain passports for all air travel back into the country from Mexico, Canada, Bermuda and the Caribbean. Beginning Jan. 1, 2008, this new rule further extends to all land and sea travel from those destinations. Officials at the State Department announced that they expect to process more than 18 million passports this year - up from 12.1 million passports processed in 2006. My office has seen requests for passports nearly double since January.

UNACCEPTABLE DELAYS

What used to be a six- to eight-week waiting period to obtain a passport was extended to a 10-12-week waiting period after the first of the year. But we know that many requests are taking much longer than that.

While watching the local evening news last week, I saw an interview with a passport applicant who came to the clerk of courts office to apply for her passport before going on her honeymoon. That was three months ago. Instead, she was forced to drive to the nearest regional U.S. passport office - in Chicago - to obtain her passport at the last minute. That is unacceptable.

OVERDUE DECISION

Fortunately for some travelers, on Friday the State Department waived the new requirement to help relieve the severe backlog of those who had already applied for a passport. These travelers are now permitted to fly without a passport if they present a State Department receipt to verify that they had applied for a passport and show government-issued identification, such as a driver's license. The decision to suspend the new law was overdue. But it does not affect those who haven't already applied for a passport. They still get to wait.

I will remind taxpayers that this is the same government organization potentially responsible for managing ill-proposed changes to our immigration policy - including documenting more than 12 million illegal immigrants in the United States. Yet they are unequipped to process 18 million passports?

HELLO, WASHINGTON?

This is another example of big government being unprepared, nearly unresponsive and poorly managed. Never fear - now that we are at the height of the summer travel season, the State Department has just announced that they will hire 400 more people to relieve the embarrassing backlog. Unfortunately, even with the additional workers, they say the earliest the backup will be eliminated is the end of September, when summer travel is long over.

In the clerk of courts office, we call all those we do business with our customers. We strive daily to lead our organization on private-sector principles and old-fashioned common sense. Our taxpayers expect and deserve nothing less.

Perhaps this is a lesson in geography after all.

To those of you in Washington: Are you listening?

Greg Hartmann is Hamilton County clerk of courts.