

# Dirty deeds, not done cheap

## Co. charges homeowners \$59 for \$1 document

By JERRY KRONENBERG

Some Bay State homeowners are paying a private company \$59.50 for "certified deeds" they could get directly from the government for about a buck.

"It may be legal, but I still think it's outrageous," Bill O'Donnell, Norfolk County's register of deeds, said of a direct-mail solicitation thousands of Massachusetts homeowners recently received.

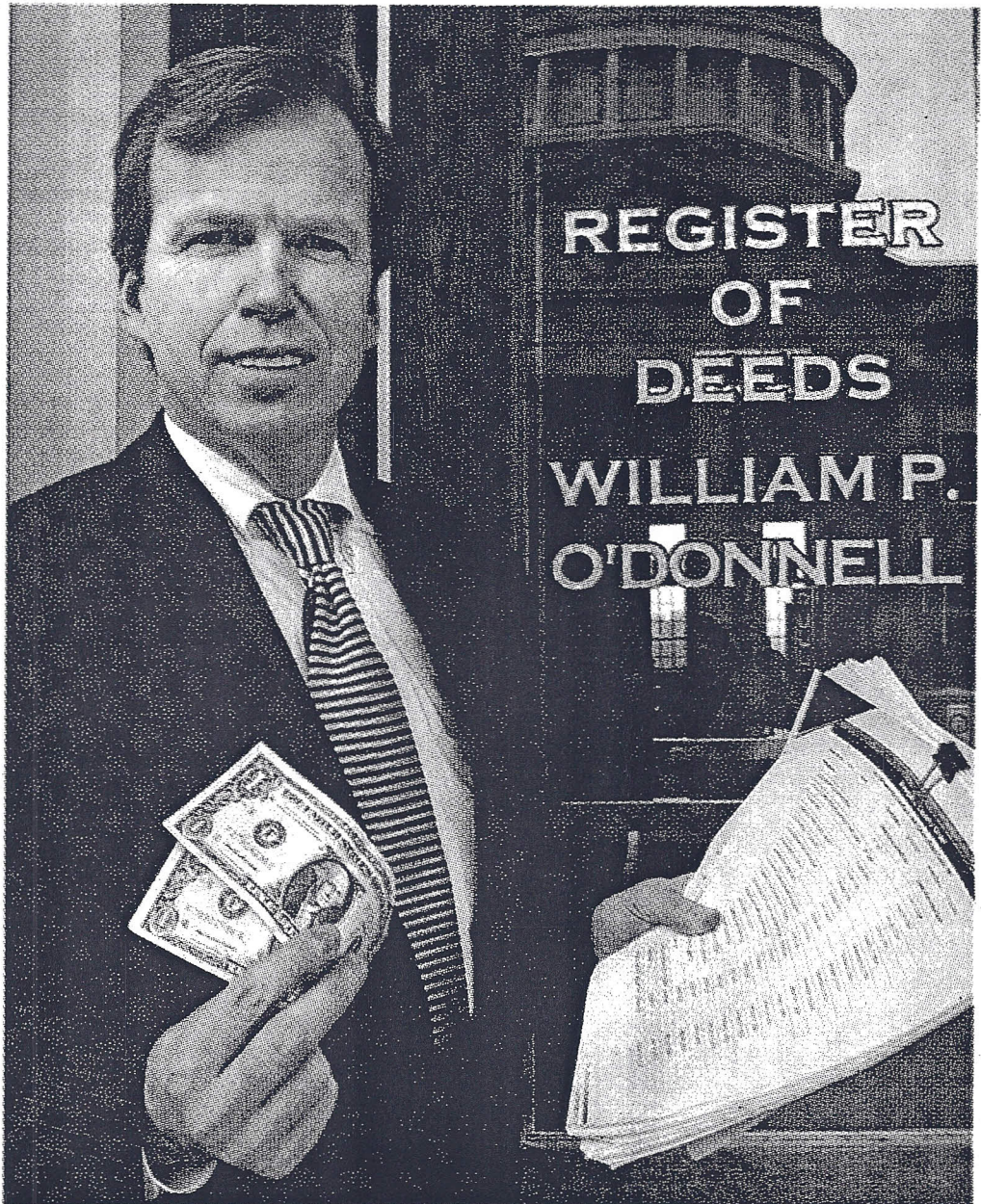
In official-looking letters that include homeowners' actual property-deed numbers, National Deed Service Inc. writes: "The U.S. Government Federal Citizens Information Center Web site recommends that property owners should have an official or certified copy of their deed. If you don't already have this important document, you may obtain one now."

The letters offer homeowners certified copies of property records for \$59.50 — even though your local registry of deeds sells the same thing directly for \$1 or \$2.

Many counties even let you download unofficial copies of deeds for free via the Web.

"I hate to say the word 'scam' only because of the fact that this is legal," said Eugene Brune, the Middlesex County/South register of deeds. "But it bothers the heck out of me that someone is trying to make a profit off of people without really providing a major service."

O'Donnell and Brune say their offices have gotten hundreds of calls in recent weeks about National Deed's letters.



STAFF PHOTO BY NANCY LANE

**WATCH FOR MONEY-WASTER:** William O'Donnell, Norfolk County register of deeds, says \$1 or \$2 will get a homeowner a copy of a property deed, which a private company is selling for \$59.50.

At least 43 Boston-area homeowners have apparently ordered records based on the solicitation.

But National Deed President Barry Isaacson maintains that he's not scamming anyone, just charging his clients convenience fees.

"We save you from having to drive down to the (re-

gistry of deeds), find the right office, stand in line and maybe wait around while your deed is prepared," Isaacson said from the company's Illinois headquarters.

The firm's letters do disclose that records "are available for free or at a nominal cost from govern-

ment agencies," and that National Deed isn't a public entity.

But the solicitations also use a Washington, D.C., return address of "1201 Pennsylvania Ave., Suite 300."

That's a mail-forwarding service down the road from 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. — the White House.