

GSCCCA Update

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November 2023

An update on the activities of the Georgia Superior Court Clerks' Cooperative Authority

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Executive Dir. John Earle to retire at year-end

After a long and meaningful career in the private and public sectors, longtime Clerks' Authority Executive Director John Earle is set to retire December 31. Earle was elevated by the Authority's Board of Directors in August 2014 and has led the Authority with dedication and distinction for the past nine years. During his tenure, the Authority experienced tremendous growth, innovation and success by enhancing critical projects and developing new ones for the benefit of the state's Superior court clerks and the citizens of Georgia.



In a decade defined by constant change, including unprecedented challenges during the Covid pandemic, John kept the Authority laser-focused on anticipating and meeting clerks' evolving needs and leveraging technology to provide them with the tools to be successful in serving their communities. I believe much of that success can be attributed to John's leadership style which is characterized by approachability, integrity and a strong sense of teamwork. Since

Greg G. Allen, chairman of the GSCCCA Board of Directors, expressed the board's deep appreciation for Earle's contributions, saying "John's leadership has been invaluable to the success the Authority has achieved over the last decade. Throughout his tenure, John has shown an unwavering commitment to clerks and has ensured that the Authority's priorities and momentum radiate from the primary mis-

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October board meeting review

The Authority Board of Directors met on October 18 for its quarterly meeting. Following is a summary of the meeting.

Swearing in of New Board Member

The Honorable Jody Higdon, Morgan County Superior Court clerk, was sworn in as a member of the Authority Board of Directors.



She was appointed by Lt. Gov. Burt Jones for a three-year term. Authority Communications Director & Compliance Officer

Mike Smith, who is a notary public, administered the oath of office.

General Business

The minutes of the July 12 scheduled board meeting were approved. Meredith Lipson, CPA, a partner with Mauldin & Jenkins, presented the June 30, 2023 Audit and the August 2023 financial reports. Lipson commended the Authority's financial staff for their diligence in following generally accepted accounting principles which enables the Authority to meet its financial obligations. The Authority has a solid financial position moving forward. A motion to approve the audit and financials as presented was approved by the board.

Executive Director Position

Following a discussion in Executive Session, the board passed a motion to accept the retirement/resignation of Executive Director John Earle, effective December 31, 2023. The board passed a second motion to appoint Rachel Rice as the new executive director, effective January 1, 2024.

Filing Activity Notification System (FANS)

The Filing Activity Notification System (FANS) was launched on January 15, 2023 and

has since experienced strong and steady growth. FANS is designed to offer individuals the ability to receive a notification when certain real estate and personal property records are filed with a Superior Court clerk, indexed, and data is transmitted by clerks throughout the state of Georgia. FANS had 17,737 registered users as of October 15, 2023, nearly doubling the total reported at the previous board meeting in July. Those users have submitted 35,918 total requests involving names, addresses and document types resulting in 20,881 matches. As of September 1, 2023, each user is required to enter their county of residence when logging into the system. This requirement will simply provide historical data for anyone interested and does not affect search or match results. The Authority is conducting public outreach through clerks of Superior Court to increase awareness.

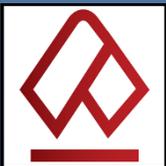
UCC Project

For Q1 FY 2024, 1,774 requests for UCC Certified Searches were received by the Authority. At the current rate, this projects to approximately 7,000 requests for FY 2024. UCC Certified Search requests are processed internally by Authority staff involving an exact-name search of the UCC database. Search results are then transmitted to the customer.

For Q1 FY 2024, there were 65,159 UCCs filed statewide which projects to approximately 261,000 UCCs filed for FY 2024. This would reflect the highest number of UCCs filed since FY 2002 (excluding pandemic years of FY 2020, FY 2021 and FY 2022).

Statewide Network Upgrade Initiative

As of October 18, 77% of Georgia counties have had their system connectivity upgraded. This represents 124 sites completed which is an additional 21 sites since the previous board meeting in July. All remaining sites are in the process of getting new lines under contract for installation and activation. The



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Board meeting review — Cont. from Page 2

statewide system upgrade is an initiative to improve upload and download speeds in all clerks' offices.

Fines & Fees Division

The Fines and Fees Division is on pace to collect more than \$82 million for FY 2024, which would be the most collected since FY 2019. To date, civil surcharges are higher for FY 2024 than previous years. Reporting compliance for all courts remains high. The Fines & Fees staff monitors potential reporting issues in order to maintain compliance.

Training & Outreach

The Authority continues to develop training courses to meet the needs of Superior Court clerks, their staffs, and the public offering a variety of in-person and virtual training. Recent topics included UCC training, the eFile Portal, the Filing Activity Notification System (FANS), real estate indexing, protective orders, fines and fees, and notary public training. The Authority's online training platform, eLearn, continues to experience heavy usage by clerks and the public. As of September 30, 2023, approximately 118,000 users had registered to use the site and, of those, 116,00 had accessed the Notary Public course. For real estate indexing, 2,591 court personnel have availed themselves of the online deed indexing courses. To date, 73 clerks and deputy clerks have successfully passed the Indexing Certification exam.

eFiling Project

Superior Court clerks continue to leverage eFiling initiatives offered by the Authority to better serve the public. It was reported at the board meeting that 151 clerks participate in UCC eFile, with 123 mandating eFiling as the only filing method. Approximately 20,000 UCCs have been eFiled per month so far in FY 2024.

For Real Estate eFile, all 159 clerks fully participate in accordance with statute by accepting all document types electronically. The online notary public application process has 152 clerks participating, with 50 clerks allowing Mail-in Renewals (MIR). A backlog of pending liens has been greatly reduced. Of the 46 counties with pending liens, 44 have been completely resolved. Additionally, of the pending liens that were 1,000 days old or older, only five remain unresolved.

eFile System Certification Project

The Authority recently communicated system updates to clerks and notifies counties when their eFile system has been certified. As of the board meeting, there were eight systems fully certified, one system in preliminary testing, and one system in final testing. Preliminary testing takes the majority of the time for the certification process.

Voluntary Historical Deed Project

As reported, 92 counties are participating in the Voluntary Historical Deed Re-Indexing Project. More than 5.5 million instruments have been released to production which is an increase of 400,000 instruments from the previous reporting period at the July board meeting. An additional 332,000 instruments are in quarantine for review.

1989-1987 Historical Deed Project

According to vendor reports as of October 13, 2023, the project includes an estimated 3.6 million total instruments. The budget for the three-year project is \$9 - \$10.8 million. To date, \$6,578,226 in compensation has been paid or is payable to clerks. More than \$750,000 has been paid to vendors.

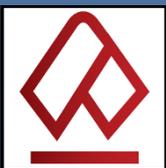
The 1989 segment is estimated to include 1.2 million instruments. Indexing has begun for all counties, with indexing complete for 140 counties, which includes 984,630 instruments. So far, \$747,834 has been paid to vendors for the 1989 segment.

The 1988 and 1987 segments began July 1, 2023. To date, 82 counties have been completed for 1988, and 78 counties have been completed for 1987. With a budget of \$4.6 million, the 1988 and 1987 segments are targeted to be completed by June 30, 2025.

Electronic Document Certification Program

As reported, 86 clerks are participating in the eCert Program, which allows individuals to electronically request certified copies of documents from a clerk's office. Eleven more clerks' offices are trained and in a testing phase. As of October 16, 2023, participating clerks had received more than 60,000 electron-

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Board meeting review — Cont. from Page 3

ic certified document requests. Authority staff is not aware of any issues related to acceptance of electronic certifications.

Archival Projects

At present, 158 counties actively participate in the VaultTek Online Archive Program which offers clerks the ability to have any and all files backed up by the Authority free-of-charge. From January through September 2023, five clerks had equipment upgrades. As of September 2023, more than 299 TBs of data, containing 1.34 billion files, have been safely backed up for clerks. More than 2.7 million deed images and 260,000 lien images were added to VaultTek as of September 30, 2023. Two clerks' offices requested their data be restored, which would not have been possible prior to VaultTek's implementation. Additionally, users of VaultTek can now access their data via the VaultTek Mobile app. Virtual Microfilm (VMF) storage includes approximately 320 million images encompassing deed, lien and plat images.

Notary & Authentications Division

The total number of persons commissioned as notaries public for Q1 FY 2024 was 12,512, which is a decrease of 1.6% when compared to the same reporting period for

FY 2023. Sales of the *Georgia Notary Handbook* remained strong, with 649 copies sold for Q1 FY 2024.

Regarding apostilles, the number issued rose 9.2% for Q1 FY 2024 when compared to the same reporting period for FY 2023, with a total of 11,384 apostilles issued through September 30, 2023. The top five destination countries for apostilles are South Korea (ROK), Mexico, Colombia, Turkey and Italy. The most popular document types are certified copy, foreign language, birth certificates, Spanish language, powers of attorney, and corporate documents. Since 1998 when the Clerks' Authority was designated as the apostille-issuing office for the state of Georgia, the number of countries signing on as a contracting party to the Hague Convention Treaty has continued to grow. In 1998, there were 62 countries signed on as parties, and the Clerks' Authority issued 6,396 apostilles that year. Today, there are 125 countries participating, with the Clerks' Authority issuing 45,209 apostilles.

Next Board Meetings

Quarterly board meetings for 2024 are scheduled for January 10, April 10, July 10, and October 9. ■

UCC eFile continues to grow

The Clerks' Authority continues to see growth and increased participation in UCC eFiling. Currently, 152 counties offer UCC eFiling, and, of those counties, 124 mandate UCC eFiling, with an additional 6 scheduled to mandate UCC eFiling effective January 1, 2024. The Authority provides sample notification documents for clerks to utilize to notify their constituents and customers of upcoming UCC eFiling mandates. Counties that mandate UCC eFiling may also take advantage of auto-numbering where the Authority's eFile Portal, <https://efile.gsccca.org>, automatically assigns the next available UCC Financing Statement number. This prevents skipping numbers, assigning duplicate numbers, not advancing the year, etc. At present, 104 counties take advantage of the auto-numbering feature, with 5 more counties scheduled to be activated on January 1.

Interested in mandating UCC eFiling and/or activating auto-numbering? Contact our Customer Support team at help@gsccca.org to get set up today!



Earle to retire — Cont. from Page 1

taking the helm, he has encouraged collaboration and fostered personal and professional growth among his team, making the Authority



not just a workplace but a family. We will miss John's steady guidance, his unwavering support, his positive, can-do attitude, and, most of all, his genuine friendship. It is with mixed emotions that we bid farewell, but on behalf of the Board, let me express our heartfelt gratitude to John for his many years of dedicated service to clerks and the Authority, and wish him and his wife, Denice, all the best as they embark on this next chapter of their life."

Earle also commented on his retirement, saying, "My time at the Authority has been an incredible journey and I am immensely proud of what we've accomplished together. Working with such an extremely talented staff and for such a dedicated group of public servants has been the dream job of a lifetime. It has truly been an honor and a privilege to serve this amazing organization. With the outstanding leadership of our Board, the skill and dedication of our professional staff, and the continued commitment of Superior Court clerks to our shared mission, I am confident the Authority is well poised to continue its critical work and achieve even greater success in the future."

Earle joined the GSCCCA in 2004 to build the organization's newly created Fines & Fees Division from the ground up and to oversee its daily operations after the Authority was mandated by the Georgia General Assembly to provide accountability and uniformity to the collection of court fees. In 2007, he took on additional responsibilities as director of financial operations for the Authority, and then was named deputy director in 2013. He was elected executive director by the Board in August 2014 following the death of his predecessor, David Williams. Prior to joining the Authority, Earle worked as a CPA in a number of accounting and tax-related positions in the private sector.

Born and raised in Anderson, SC, Earle earned an undergraduate degree in business administration from The Citadel and an MBA from the University of Georgia. He and his wife, Denice, also a UGA grad, live in Atlanta and have two adult children, Rebecca and David. Rebecca, who is a graduate of Auburn University, and her husband, Marshall, have three children. David is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point and served for five years as an officer in the Army. He recently obtained an MBA from the University of Georgia and began working for Bank of America in Charlotte, NC.



As John transitions into a well-deserved retirement, we express our deepest gratitude for his extraordinary leadership and unwavering dedication to the Authority. He has left an indelible mark on our organization, and will forever remain a member of the

clerk and Authority family. We'll certainly miss his daily presence, but wish him all the happiness and fulfillment in this new phase of his life ... enjoying cherished time with his kids and grandkids, traveling to bucket-list spots with his wife, Denice, cheering on his beloved Dawgs and Braves, and spending more time lowering his handicap. ■





A message from GSCCCA Executive Director John Earle

Following is the message sent to Superior Court clerks from John announcing his retirement.

Dear Clerks,

For the past 9 years, I've had the wonderful opportunity to serve you in my capacity as the Executive Director of the GSCCCA. As my predecessor, David Williams, once said, "*it's been the dream job of a lifetime,*" and I couldn't agree more. I've had the opportunity to work daily with an extremely talented staff who constantly strive to provide you with the most innovative and professional service possible, and work for a dedicated group of public servants — you, my "clerk family" — who never cease to inspire me with your tenacity, forward-thinking spirit, and ability to adapt to change and embrace new opportunities at every turn.

After quite a bit of prayerful thought and discussion with my family, I have decided to begin the transition into the next chapter of my life, "*retirement,*" effective at the close of December 31, 2023. The decision is certainly not an easy one as I love the folks that I work with and for, but I'm also looking forward to spending more time with my family, playing more golf, and perhaps traveling to places that my wife and I have always wanted to visit.

I'm very thankful for the support of Authority Chairman Greg Allen and the other Board members upon their learning of my decision to retire. I also owe a great deal of gratitude to the former Authority chairs with whom I worked, Barry Wilkes and Jean Rogers, and long-time Authority consultants Gary Yates and John Myers. These people, along with Greg and the Board, played such a vital role in the Authority's success during my tenure (and before), and I'm tremendously grateful for their support, guidance and friendship. I'd also like to acknowledge the significant and continuing impact of former Executive Director David Williams who brought me into the Authority family in 2004, provided strong support during my first decade, and built an incredible staff that I inherited. And, lastly, let me express my deepest gratitude to each of you, Georgia's Superior Court clerks, for your support, collaboration, and friendship. Working with and for you has been such an honor and I'm immensely proud of what we have accomplished together.

Although I have mixed emotions about leaving from a personal standpoint, I am confident that the Authority is well poised to continue providing you with the outstanding service that you've come to expect and deserve long after I'm gone due to the outstanding leadership of our Board of Directors and the skill and dedication of our professional staff. This, along with your continued commitment to our shared mission, will ensure the Authority's future is as bright as its past.

Thank you for allowing me to be part of the Authority's incredible journey. It has truly been an honor and a privilege to serve you and this amazing organization.

Kindest regards,

John Earle

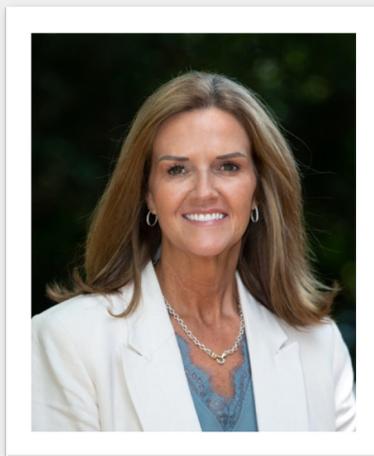


eCopy now available

eCopy is here! The Clerks' Authority has expanded its eCertification Portal, <https://ecert.gsccca.org>, to allow for electronic copies. Launched on September 1, this new feature allows clerks' offices to offer regular copies in addition to certified copies. Similar to eCertified copies, regular copies will be processed in the same manner, but with no cover page and different filing fees. With a simple check of a box, a clerk's office can activate electronic copies for any document type set-up in eCert or any docu-

ment type they wish to add. As reported at the recent Authority board meeting, 86 counties are currently participating in the eCert Program, with an additional 11 counties trained and in a testing phase.

The Authority is excited to grow its eCertification Portal by offering eCopy and hopes clerks find value in this new feature! For more information or help getting set up, contact ecert@gsccca.org. ■



Authority welcomes Jody Higdon to board

Congratulations and welcome to Morgan County Superior Court Clerk Jody Higdon who recently joined the Authority Board of Directors. Jody was appointed by Lt. Gov. Burt Jones and will serve a three-year term.

Jody has served as clerk of the Superior & Juvenile Courts of Morgan County since 2005. Since being elected, she has been committed to utilizing technology for the benefit of her constituents, while maintaining personal relationships and providing excellent customer service. She became the first clerk to offer Child Support eFiling in 2010, and has worked to ensure that all Morgan County real estate filings and Superior and Juvenile Court cases dating back to 1809 are fully digitized.

Active within her profession and admired by her colleagues, Jody was elected chair of the 8th Judicial District for the Council of Superior Court Clerks of Georgia from 2018 through 2023. During that period, she was also a member of the Council's Executive Board, serving on both their Audit and Budget Committees. In 2019, she was voted "Clerk of the Year" for the 8th Judicial District. Additionally, she has served as the clerks' president for the Ocmulgee Judicial Circuit since 2018.

Jody is a graduate of the University of Georgia with a Bachelor of Arts in Accounting and Business Management. When not at the courthouse, Jody loves spending time with her family and watching her beloved DAWGS play! Besides being avid Georgia fans, she and her husband, Greg, enjoy boating, gardening, history and travel ... and love combining the last two. No matter where their travels take them, Jody and Greg always look for historical landmarks.

"On behalf of the Authority and our Board of Directors, I'd like to offer a warm welcome to Jody," said Authority Board Chairman Greg Allen. "We're thrilled to have the benefit of her talent, experience and passion, and appreciate her commitment to ensuring the success of the Authority and those we serve."



Take advantage of 2024 training opportunities

The Authority's 2024 training program has been finalized and again offers a variety of educational opportunities in three convenient formats: in-person classes, webinars, and online courses. All training is open and free-of-charge to Superior Court clerks, their employees, and vendors.

In-person classes

In-person, classroom training will be offered on the Real Estate Indexing Standards at four locations across the state. Each class is three hours in length and hosted by a Superior Court clerk. Dates and locations are listed in the schedule to the right and a description of the program content follows. To register for classroom training, please go to www.gsccca.org/training.

Real Estate Indexing Standards –

Suitable for both new and experienced indexers, this in-person course provides an in-depth look at the GSCCCA statewide indexing standards including a review of the indexing process from start to finish. The material will cover: why the indexing standards exist and the difference between your local index and the statewide GSCCCA index; extracting and indexing instrument types, party names, property data, cross indexing, and use of the general description field; and a review of hard-to-index instruments including government names, tricky human names, and HUD! Come prepared with questions and comments for the Authority and fellow clerks.

Webinars

Webinars continue to be a popular format due to their convenience. Program descriptions follow with class dates listed in the

2024 Training Schedule

In-person Classroom Training

February 9	Madison	Real Estate Indexing Standards
May 14	Tifton	Real Estate Indexing Standards
August 8	Hamilton	Real Estate Indexing Standards
October 3	Cleveland	Real Estate Indexing Standards

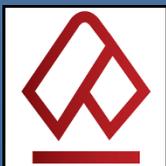
Webinars

January 23	R.E. Indexing Certification Exam Study Guide
January 26	Get to Know the Authority
February 1	Authority Services How-to Guide
February 6	eFile – Common Questions
February 16	How to Search GSCCCA.org (<i>New</i>)
March 5	R.E. Indexing Certification Exam Study Guide
March 21	Get to Know the Authority
April 11	Authority Services How-to Guide
April 30	eFile – Common Questions
May 3	How to Search GSCCCA.org (<i>New</i>)
June 5	Get to Know the Authority
June 13	R.E. Indexing Certification Exam Study Guide
July 16	Authority Services How-to Guide
July 25	eFile – Common Questions
August 13	How to Search GSCCCA.org (<i>New</i>)
Sept. 10	Get to Know the Authority
Sept. 13	R.E. Indexing Certification Exam Study Guide
Sept. 18	Authority Services How-to Guide
October 10	How to Search GSCCCA.org (<i>New</i>)
October 23	eFile – Common Questions

schedule above. To register for a webinar, please go to www.gsccca.org/training.

- ❖ **Authority Services How-to Guide** – This course takes an in-depth look at the services the Authority provides and how to maximize use of these services. Want to know how to replace equipment, access MyVault, get access to the Clerk Resource Center, set up new emails? Get the answers to these questions and many more in this one-hour guide for Authority services.
- ❖ **eFile – Common Questions** – With the increase of eFiling, the Authority receives questions regarding UCC and Real Estate

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2024 training opportunities — Cont. from Page 8

eFiling on a regular basis. This one-hour program will review common questions as well as scenarios a clerk's office may face when handling eFilings. This is a great opportunity to learn more about the eFile process and system behavior, and where to go for support!

- ❖ **Get to Know the Authority** – Want to put a face to the name? This 30-minute webinar will introduce the staff of the Authority! We will cover each department in the Authority, the department's role, how to contact members, the Authority's history, and much more. Join us and get to know the Authority staff!
- ❖ **How to Search GSCCCA.org (NEW)** – This course provides an overview of how to search the statewide Deed, Lien, Plat, UCC, and Notary indexes on www.GSCCCA.org. Included in the training will be sample searches, report this image (and what that means), premium search features, and more! Join us for this 30-minute webinar to get a better understanding of the Authority's website, GSCCCA.org, and become a savvy searcher!
- ❖ **Real Estate Indexing Certification Exam Study Guide** – This one-hour webinar takes an in-depth look at the Indexing Certification Exam and will familiarize users with the testing system and functionality. Additionally, the program will cover the pre-requisites to taking the exam and offer some tips and tools that can be used to pass the exam.

Online courses

In addition to the in-person classes and webinars being offered

in 2024, the Authority will continue to provide its popular and widely utilized online training courses via its eLearn website.

Courses include:

- ❖ GSCCCA Indexing Standards
- ❖ GSCCCA Indexing Standards – Extended
- ❖ GSCCCA Indexing Standards – Common Mistakes
- ❖ Introduction to GSCCCA Fines & Fees
- ❖ Notary Online
- ❖ Notary Online – Mail-In Renewal
- ❖ Notary Public Training
- ❖ Notary Public Final Exam
- ❖ UCC Training

Courses are available 24/7 making training completely flexible. To learn more about or register for one of these online training options, please go to <https://eLearn.gsccca.org>.

With questions regarding any of the Authority's 2024 training opportunities, email training@gsccca.org. ■

Host notary public training

The Authority continues to offer notary public training, with Mike Smith pictured below teaching a class in September hosted by Muscogee County Superior Court Clerk Danielle Forte.

(Rachel Rice is shown teaching a recent Fines & Fees class at the Authority office.) Hosting the Notary Public Training class provides tremendous exposure for clerks and a valuable service to their constituents. If interested in hosting this class, please contact the Authority to get your class scheduled.

