

WENATCHEE WORLD

Siri Woods has given public its money's worth

By [Rufus Woods](#)

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The news that Siri Woods will be retiring at the end of the year after serving 33 years as Chelan County Superior Court Clerk has prompted some mixed emotions. She has more than earned her retirement but boy, she will be a difficult person to replace.

Woods has been a special public servant who has brought an entrepreneurial flair to the job while at the same time being a steadfast and relentless defender of the public's right to know what's happening in the judicial system.

My guess is that few people realize how much of an impact she has had on the way things operate in the Chelan County Courthouse, not to mention how much influence she has had on a statewide basis. Chelan County Superior Court is today at the leading edge of technology in this state, thanks in large part to Woods. It's one of two paperless offices, although they've renamed the approach "paper on demand" to make it a little less intimidating. If a judge wants a document printed, it's available in that form. But it's a tremendous cost savings to only print the documents that are needed.

Woods, who is a shirttail relative of mine, told me that moving to electronic records was necessary to meet the challenging financial situation in the county. With tight budgets, "you either change the way you do business or you do a poor job," she said. Providing poor service was not an option she was prepared to accept.

When she first started under Judge Lawrence Leahy, the clerk's office was a financial burden on the county; there were no revenues to offset the expenses. That changed because of efforts Woods initiated and supported. At one time, collecting restitution was a responsibility of the state Department of Corrections, but Woods helped convince the Legislature to let the clerks handle the job. Restitution can bring in as much as \$500,000 a year to the county, which is no small sum.

Her work on keeping electronic records open to the public will have an impact on the state long after she's gone. During her tenure on the Judicial Information Systems committee established by the Supreme Court, she has fought for the notion that if a record is public on paper, then it should be available via the Internet. She has been at the forefront of efforts to ensure that electronic court records remain open to the public, which is something that those of us in the news media appreciate but which also benefits the general public in ways that are not always apparent. Transparency is crucial to public confidence in our judiciary.

If you want an example of an exemplary public servant, you won't find a better example than Siri Woods. When you combine strong beliefs in open government with an attitude of dogged determination, great things can be accomplished, as she has clearly demonstrated.