

**WEATHER ALERT:**

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http://www.yakimaherald.com/opinion/editorials/independent-report-sends-clear-message-to-county-clerk/article_05a7371c-29ee-11e6-baab-07d3bc9fc3ed.html

Independent report sends clear message to county clerk

Yakima Herald-Republic Editorial Board **Jun 4, 2016**

Almost from the day in January 2015 that Janelle Riddle assumed the office of Yakima County clerk, she has engaged much of Yakima County's government in a she-said/they-said squabble. Now an independent report largely supports what they said — and warns that the dispute has risen from an internal tiff to full-blown conflict that threatens the integrity of the judicial system itself. The report concludes that Riddle faces severe sanctions — and deservedly so — if she doesn't come around.

This is a strong directive — no, demand — that it's time for Riddle to come around.

The report was the product of a blue-ribbon panel consisting of former Yakima County Prosecuting Attorney and U.S. Attorney Jeff Sullivan, Yakima attorney Dick Johnson and local accountant Abby Sanders.

Overall, the report cited her refusal to cooperate with other county departments, a problem that extends to her actions regarding the panel itself. Riddle was offered to chance to respond to the report by May 27, which she declined to do. She also was absent from last week's meeting at which the panel released the report, though a deputy clerk from her office was there.

The report detailed descriptions about the shortcomings of the clerk's office — and the consequences if the situation is not rectified soon.

Among the issues: delays in processing judgments, child-support orders and protection orders; mistakes in how court records are entered into the Odyssey case management system, whose implementation she has resisted from Day One; Riddle's resistance to having her office conduct duties that are spelled out in state law; and a significant decrease in revenue, attributed in part to the office not following through on billing for jury services to other courts in Yakima County.

The revenue issue also comes to the fore in Riddle's desire to sever an agreement, dating to 2010 under predecessor Kim Eaton, that requires some of her staff to work for Superior Court. County officials say the agreement saves the county about \$400,000 a year.

The report was quite specific on the issue of working with Superior Court as it invoked the following wording from the Washington state constitution: "The county clerk shall be by virtue of his office, clerk of the superior court." The report also cited state law and precedent in other Superior Courts on the issue of recording court proceedings, which Riddle has resisted on separation-of-powers grounds.

The panel likewise was quite specific on the sanctions that Riddle could face if she does not comply with the court rule on providing staff to the court: judges could place her in contempt, which could result in fines or jail time — as if there isn't already enough disruption in the courthouse.

Over the past year-and-a-half, Riddle's antagonists haven't been blameless in this dispute. Riddle's concerns about Odyssey had some basis in the experience of other states, though the evidence on the whole supports the decision to go with the new system. There was also an incident with county Commissioner Rand Elliott, in which Riddle claimed he grabbed her arm during a heated discussion. He initially denied it, then later wrote an apology that conceded her version was correct.

But the panel's report makes clear that the onus is on Riddle and her staff to start complying with the court arrangement and with state law. Leaders of other departments understand what's at stake and have expressed a desire to rectify the issues with Riddle's cooperation. "Ms. Riddle shouldn't feel like she is alone on an island," the report concludes. "She can turn things around in the Clerk's office during the remainder of her term if she becomes more open and communicative, and if she enlists the assistance of others who are available, capable and willing to help her."

The time to start doing that is now.

* Members of the Yakima Herald-Republic editorial board are Bob Crider, Frank Purdy and Karen Troianello.