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Credit card fees bumped up at Registry of Deeds

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AUGUSTA -- Kennebec County Registry of Deeds officials say they're still ahead in revenue from where they were a year ago, in spite of a surcharge of more than 3 percent on records paid for with a credit card.

A law passed this spring allows municipalities to charge an additional fee to cover credit card companies' usage fees. The county's Registry of Deeds started implementing their own surcharge Nov. 1.

So far, so good, deeds officials say.

"We started it Nov. 1, and I've only had one complaint," county Register of Deeds Beverly Bustin-Hatheway said. "I wouldn't say there's a huge increase (in revenue), but we're ahead of where we were a year ago. That's always a good thing."

It's also convenient, she said. A third party -- the company that handles the data software for the registries -- processes the fees, rather than staff. Bustin-Hatheway said she maintains the merchant account for the deeds office.

Town and cities had to absorb the cost of credit card transactions before the law was passed.

The Legislature agreed earlier this year to allow vendors, such as a city or town, to impose an additional fee to cover the gap.

Kennebec County's Registry of Deeds has set the fee at 3.1 percent of the purchase, Bustin-Hatheway said.

The law, however, has not been fully embraced by municipalities. "It's been slow going for a few reasons," Jeff Austin of the Maine Municipal Association said.

In order to accept credit cards and pass the fee through to the customer, some communities may have to change computer systems or software, which comes at a high price, Austin said.

Another wrinkle, he said, is stipulations put into the law itself.

"The law reasonably requires you to disclose the fee to the consumer before the transaction, which can't be more than what you, as the merchant, are charged by the card company or issuer," Austin said. "But you, often times, don't know what that fee is until after the transaction has gone through."

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