

New Judgeships Approved

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Circuit Court Administrator

In my September 2000 Laches column I mentioned that our judges were asked by the State Court Administrative Office to keep detailed time records as to their activity by case type, both on and off the bench. The time study was a small part of a larger effort to evaluate the judicial resource needs of courts throughout the state. The State Court Administrative Office developed a sophisticated weighted caseload formula to aid in the determination of where judicial resources should be added, and where they should be reduced. The time records from our judges were provided to the State Court Administrative Office in November 2000 for analysis.

In addition to the time records, the State Court Administrative Office spent much of early 2001 extending its analysis to include other factors that affect a court's ability to process its docket – factors such as population growth, caseload composition, caseload trends, staffing levels, technological resources, and others. Upon conclusion of its evaluation last summer, the State Court Administrative Office recommended that two additional judgeships be added to our Circuit bench.

Legislation was passed late last fall authorizing two new circuit judgeships for Oakland County. Michigan law requires that a court's funding unit must also approve new judgeships. The Board of Commissioners just a few weeks ago approved a resolution creating the new judicial positions.

Anyone interested in running for the positions must obtain a nominating petition, an affidavit of identity, and an affidavit of constitutional qualification. These items may be obtained from the County Clerk's Office. The petitioner must collect a minimum of 4,000 – up to a maximum of 8,000 – signatures from registered voters in Oakland County. Petitions must be filed with the Secretary of State's Bureau of Elections by 4:00 p.m. EST on Tuesday, April 30, 2002.

The primary election will be held August 6, 2002. The new judicial positions will be shown on the primary ballot if there are at least five candidates for the positions. State law requires that the positions be included on the primary ballot if the number of candidates is more than two times the number of positions available. The four candidates who receive the highest vote totals will be included on the ballot for the November 5 general election. The candidate with the most votes in the general election will be elected to an

eight-year term.

The candidate with the next highest vote total will be elected to a six-year term. The differing term lengths are to ensure that an equal (or as close to equal as possible) number of judges are on the ballot during each election cycle. The newly elected judges will take office on January 1, 2003.

The new judgeships will bring the total number of Circuit judges to 19. The expected allocation will be 14 judges in the general jurisdiction division and five in the family division. It is expected that three Probate judges will also be assigned family dockets.

Those who are familiar with the courthouse are probably asking the obvious question: Where will the new judges be housed? Solving this problem isn't easy. As those who frequent the courthouse know, there is no space for additional judges or staff. For several months we've been working with the County Executive's Office to construct a plan that will permit the two new courtrooms to be fully functioning and operational when the new judges take office. The commissioners will consider a proposed construction plan this month, a plan that is being finalized at the time this article is being written.

It would be presumptuous of me to discuss the construction plan in detail given that this article will be sent to the publisher prior to an approval and funding being obtained from the commissioners to move ahead. Suffice it to say, those involved in the plan's development are optimistic that construction will be completed in time for the new judges to take office should the requisite approvals be obtained in the next few weeks. If the proposed plan is authorized, the impact of construction in the courthouse is expected to be negligible. We believe that operations in the courthouse will be conducted as usual and that day-to-day activities will be unaffected by the development of the new courtrooms.

We've got a lot of work ahead of us, but we're excited about the prospect of welcoming two new judges to the bench. We'll do our best to ensure that you are able to conduct business as usual in the courthouse without unnecessary disruption.

Until next month ...

