

New courts need space

Pinch may send prosecutor packing

By MICHAEL MATUSZEWSKI

Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson may find his office space caught up in the "Circuit Court Shuffle."

Circuit Court officials and county commissioners are eyeing Patterson's office space as well as that of the county's reimbursement division as possible locations for three courtrooms to accommodate three new circuit judges. The judges will be invested Jan. 1.

Whether or not Patterson's offices are commandeered, the county will have to prepare temporary courtrooms because, officials said, it is unlikely that any offices could be remodeled by Jan. 1.

Last week, Circuit Court Chief Judge Steven Andrews told county commissioners that proposals calling for the judges to share courtrooms and offices as well as starting a night court were impractical and unfeasible.

"ANYTHING LESS than three additional courtrooms with attending offices will set the court back," Andrews said.

"This is not just a matter of convenience to the judges," he told the public services committee of the board of commissioners. "Why provide three new judges to handle a backlog of court cases, and then ask people to play 'hide and seek' to locate where the judges will be holding court?"

"In such an arrangement," he continued, "We are creating costly delays in the court system we now seek to improve."

THE BOARD OF commissioners has yet to make any firm decisions concerning the new courtrooms. The public services committee put off action for at least a week in order to get new recommendations from County Executive Daniel T. Murphy.

Once a decision comes from the public services committee, however, it will most likely be referred to the board's finance and planning and building committees before the full board ever takes formal action.

Since permanent courtrooms are unlikely before Jan. 1

Andrews urged the board to rent space from the Oakland Intermediate School District. The Oakland Schools' administrative building is located across from the Oakland County Courthouse and the county service complex.

CIRCUIT COURT Administrator Fred Mester said even temporarily locating the courtrooms outside the courthouse could prevent a number of problems.



First, circuit court might be forced to seek a special waiver from the Michigan Supreme Court allowing it try cases in courtrooms in the Oakland Schools building. Usually, he said, cases must be tried in the county seat. The courthouse is in Pontiac, the Oakland Schools' building is in Waterford Township.

Mester said getting the the Supreme Court's permission would not be a serious problem.

More serious, he said, would be the problems of transporting prisoners to the courtrooms and files and documents from the courthouse to the judges.

"People don't realize," Mester said, "that when you move things just down the block, it really slows things up."

WHILE OFFICIALS said they were confident temporary space would be found, they were more concerned with convincing commissioners that earlier proposals were not in the best interest of the court.

Andrews said the county executive's earlier plan of having judges share courtrooms would usually leave "two or three judges without a courtroom."

A judge cannot function without a courtroom, Andrews told the commissioners.

In the end, Mester said, renovations to build the three courtrooms would cost the county \$300,000.

When the state legislature first ordered the expansion of Oakland's circuit bench, the Murphy predicted the county would be forced to build a new courthouse wing which would cost millions.

Errant father bounty arrives

Oakland County picked up an extra \$600,000 last week.

It was the state's first payment in a new program which tracks down divorced or separated fathers who have defaulted in paying their children's medical bills.

The Third Party Liability Program, which was originally proposed to the state legislature by Oakland Circuit Court officials, is intended to save the state some money, return some to the county and hold the father responsible for his children.

The program began because many fathers defaulted on medical payments and the state wound up footing the bill, said county circuit court administrator Fred Mester. The state never bothered to try to collect the bills, he added.

IN THE 11 months since the program began, the state has recovered about \$3 million in Oakland County alone, Mester said. The county's share, 20 per cent of the total, so far amounts to \$600,000.

Of that amount, \$300,000 will be turned over to the county's general fund and the remainder will remain with the court.

Mester said finding the fathers relies heavily on computer records, the Friend of the Court office, court service office investigators and county deputy sheriffs.

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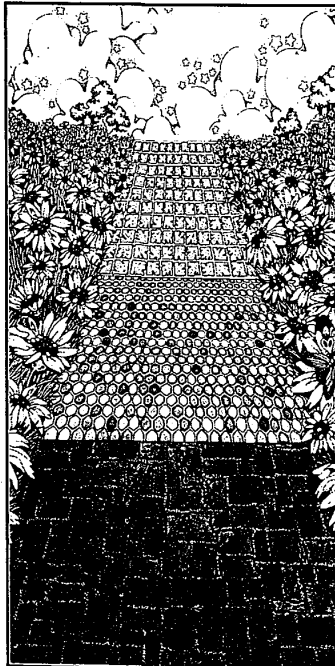


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