

Council discusses judge's hiring practices

By Susan Duck
staff writer

New Judge Fred Harris' hiring practices dominated a city council Monday approved amending Farmington Hills' portion of the 47th District Court's 1989-90 budget.

The budget amendment will cost the city \$9,390.

The retirement of Judge Michael Hand in April resulted in unanticipated costs as court duties were turned over to Harris, a Farmington Hills attorney and former Oakland County Road Commission chairman. His term runs to Jan. 1, 1991.

Visiting judges and substitute court reporters during the transition period increased the court's operating costs. "Our visiting judges were not as careful or as caring in appointing court-appointed counsel," said presiding Judge Margaret Schaeffer.

Increased expenditures of \$14,000 were reduced by other savings of \$11,400. Farmington Hills' share of the overrun is \$9,390, or about 82 percent of the total.

The court also incurred \$5,500 for recording equipment installed in Judge Harris' courtroom. The Deputy State Court Administrator, John Ferry, Jr., has requested through the court administrator's office a supplemental request to the state legislature to reimburse the court for this

expense, but the reimbursement is not certain.

MUCH OF Monday's city council discussion about the court focused on Harris' hiring practices.

Harris fired veteran court reporter Cindy Hago two months before she would have been vested in her pension through the city of Farmington Hills.

"I think that anyone familiar with my background knows that with an issue like that, I'm super sensitive," Harris said. "I was not aware, quite frankly, that this person was this close to being vested. I would hope that we could do something to resolve this issue."

Harris has also been criticized for firing 11-year court officer Howard Aldrich and replacing him with his own son, Patrick Harris, until a uniformed police officer can be assigned to improve courthouse security.

"This was my personal decision and I'll take the heat for it," said Harris at Monday's meeting in response to criticism voiced by Councilwoman Jean Fox. "I have now a person who I can get rid of like that, my son, Patrick, who's a college student," said Harris.

"See, that's the thing I have a problem with," Fox said. "We've had some ethics problems in the city. Even though this is a short-time situation, it's a questionable situation."

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— Jean Fox
Farmington Hills councilwoman

We used to call this nepotism, where you hire a member of your own family. Couldn't the court officer have stayed or couldn't some other people in the community have handled it?" Councilman Paul Sowerby said it

"grieves me that a court reporter was let go and we go out and hire temporary. I realize Judge Harris has the right to hire whoever he wants. But to terminate somebody and then to hire somebody on an in-

term basis, it seems not to be logical."

HARRIS was appointed by Gov. James Blanchard and took the oath of office May 1. He was put on the payroll May 3 and was formally sworn in May 23. During May, Harris "learned" to become a judge by working in courtrooms in Walled Lake, Livonia and Plymouth.

"It's true that we had Judge Harris' salary for May and also a visiting judge's," said Schaeffer. "He had a busy practice to wind up. He had to have other lawyers take his cases. He had to talk to his clients."

"If anybody's at fault, I'll have to take the rap for that," she added.

Harris took the bench June 1. Sowerby added that the entire situation could have been coordinated better. "The wisdom of Judge Harris' decision will come," said Sowerby.

Harris said he previously met with the city manager and the chief of police about bringing a uniformed police officer aboard. He hopes "to get a police officer in the courthouse as quickly as possible."

"It is my intention to have a uniformed police officer. We've had instances from time to time when we've needed the presence of a police officer. Nobody has that authority, ability, capacity and know-how to put handcuffs on anybody and put him into a holding cell," said Harris.

He said that he offered that position to a police officer who was near retirement, but that officer was concerned about what would affect his pension.

"We wish none of this had reached the notoriety stage," said councilwoman Jody Soronen, noting that a judicial appointment isn't something the city is "overly familiar with."

Time capsule to be buried at picnic

The Committee on the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution will conclude this year's Farmington/Farmington Hills Founders Festival activities with a patriotic event.

At 4:30 p.m. Sunday (not Saturday, as reported in Monday's Observer) in Farmington Hills' Heritage Park,

the committee will host an old-fashioned picnic. The Franklin Village Band, conducted by Dr. Conrad Lam, will be featured.

At the conclusion of this picnic, people may contribute items that reflect the true flavor of the Farmington Hills/Farmington area to a time

capsule. The capsule will be opened on the 250th anniversary of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in the year 2041.

This event will be held in the picnic grove at Heritage Park, on Farmington Road, between 10 and 11 Mile. Guests may bring a picnic

supper and enjoy the patriotic music by John Phillip Sousa, George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin. The band concert will precede the burying of the time capsule.

Picnic-goers may contribute any items they feel are representative of this time in the Farmington area.

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