
ADMINISTRATOR'S OFFICE
NEWS RELEASE



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Commissioners Approve Adding Circuit Court Judge, Staff

GRAND RAPIDS – The Kent County Board of Commissioners voted this morning to add an additional 17th Circuit Court Judgeship starting in 2017. The vote accepts the recommendation of the State Court Administrator's Office (SCAO) which is required to evaluate the State's judicial resources every two years and make recommendations regarding the number of judgeships. The recommendations are based on caseload, processing time and other data.

In 2013, the SCAO issued a report that recommended an additional Circuit Court Judgeship. The County's Judicial Resources Subcommittee at that time did not recommend the additional judgeship, but stated that the issue should be re-evaluated in 2015. In August 2015, Kent County Board Chair Koorndyk appointed a Judicial Resources Subcommittee (Chaired by Commissioner Dick Vander Molen, with Commissioners Mandy Bolter, Dave Bulkowski, Roger Morgan, and Jim Saalfeld). The group met with Kent County's Judges, Prosecutor and Sheriff to evaluate the SCAO's 2015 Report, which re-iterated the 2013 recommendation. The Subcommittee recommended the County approve adding a Circuit Court Judge, as well as two Circuit Court Clerks, two Corrections Officers, one Assistant Prosecuting Attorney and upgrading the role of a Clerk in the Prosecutor's Office.

The additional staff for the Prosecutor and Sheriff's Office are required to support the increased activity levels associated with an additional judgeship. An additional Prosecuting Attorney will help with efficient case processing. Additional Corrections Officers are required to provide security for the anticipated increase in court time and to maintain a safe environment. "The Subcommittee understood that security is essential at the courts," said Jim Saalfeld, Vice Chair and member of the Judicial Resources Subcommittee. "Adding two Corrections Officers to courthouse security will make it safer for inmates, witnesses and court staff, and allow for a more efficient transfer of inmates back and forth from the jail to the courts."

Kent County has seen a substantial increase in Probate Court and child protective cases in recent years. "I truly appreciate the Board of Commissioners for its favorable action on the SCAO report," Circuit Court Chief Judge Donald Johnston said. "The new judge will be assigned to the Family Division, which means one or more of the Probate Judges currently assigned to that division will be returned on a part-time basis to help Judge David Murkowski with the increasingly heavy Probate Court docket. This move will benefit Kent County families."

"I believe the County leadership was deliberative in this process, making sure we waited until we were in a position to approve the Judgeship as well as the staff and physical infrastructure needed to support the recommendation," said Dan Koorndyk, Chair of the Kent County Board of Commissioners. "The Subcommittee made their decision in a thoughtful, fiscally responsible manner both in 2013 and now."

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The new Circuit Court Judge will be determined by a vote of Kent County residents in the general election in November 2016, during the same election as the vacant judgeship in the Civil/Criminal Division created by the retirement of Judge George Buth. The State provides for the Judge's salary and certain benefits, but the County is required to provide worker's compensation and health and life insurance. Kent County will have to fund the additional staff required, as well as provide for the facility needs for the new judgeship. The County will soon begin the build out of the remaining two courtrooms and judicial suites at the Courthouse at 180 Ottawa NW in Grand Rapids.

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