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Panoramic view of new courtroom at Pinellas Criminal Justice Center

Criminal Justice Center's New Courtroom Built With Ingenuity, Facility Staff's Commitment

CLEARWATER – The Sixth Judicial Circuit has opened a new courtroom at the Pinellas Criminal Justice Center (CJC), culminating a joint effort of the court, county government and the Facilities Management staff.

Judge Patrick Caddell, administrator of the County Court Criminal Division, said the new courtroom at CJC, 14250 49th St., is unique in several ways, including:

- It is the 23rd courtroom in a facility that was designed for 22;
- It was fast-tracked through a process, for which planning began late last year;
- For the first time, it provides the Circuit with the opportunity to conduct first-appearance advisory hearings in the same courtroom every day;
- The entire construction process – including the high-quality woodwork– was done by the Facilities Management staff at CJC, with cabling and electronics installation by the court's Information Technology staff.



Employees presented with cake featuring likeness of their work.

Caddell and Pinellas County Judge Paul A. Levine are the two judges assigned to Courtroom 23 for the advisory hearings that are held twice a day during the week and once a day on weekends and holidays. The advisory hearings comply with a legal requirement that anyone who is arrested go before a judge within 24 hours to be advised of their rights and the charges against them. Defendants facing more than 83,000 charges appeared for such hearings in 2006.

Caddell praised the quality of the work and the commitment of the CJC Facilities staff, which began building the courtroom in December. “Their effort and commitment mean the taxpayers of Pinellas County are better served because this courtroom gives us much needed space and helps manage a constantly growing caseload,” Caddell said. “And we were able to get it on-line much quicker because their skills and professionalism eliminated a lengthy, drawn-out process that would have been required, had we had to use an outside construction firm.”

At a gathering on Friday (March 30), those involved in construction were presented with a resolution signed by Chief Judge David A. Demers and Caddell and stating that “the judges of the Sixth Judicial Circuit laud the diligence of the Pinellas County Facility Management and Cabinet Shop . . .” Employees also were served refreshments, including a cake featuring two photos of the courtroom.

Demers expressed his “appreciation for Pinellas County’s rapid response to our need and the outstanding work by county employees.”

Project planning and construction began late last year for the 1400 square-foot area that includes the 1100-square-foot courtroom, two attorney/witness rooms and an office area for the general magistrate who works on dependency cases in Unified Family Court. That’s when Caddell approached county commissioners to explain the space crunch and the need for more courtroom space (although the courts are part of the State’s judicial branch, the county is responsible for providing facilities). The plan that was hatched from Caddell’s talks with commissioners involved tightening up the space devoted to law book stacks and public area in CJC Law Library.

The County’s Architectural Department drew up a design, the county’s cabinet shop personnel began work on the necessary tables, judge’s bench, clerk’s station, etc., and the Facilities Management staff began the massive job of moving the law library stacks and building out the space to comply with fire codes and security requirements.

When the Criminal Justice facility was opened in 1996, the 22 courtrooms in its original design were supposed to satisfy the county’s needs until 2010. Build-out on the last of those 22 courtrooms was completed in 2003, but arrests – and the subsequent criminal caseload have continued to grow. From the time the complex opened, the annual number of new criminal case filings has increased by more 5,000 cases to 47,124 in 2006.

Caddell pointed out that the permanent assignment of himself and Levine to the advisory hearings was part of a reorganization that Chief Judge David Demers undertook last year to help all the circuit’s judges deal with their continually growing caseload and to move defendants through the court system more quickly. The reassignment of duties grew out of a study of the Pinellas County Jail’s overcrowding problems. Another part of the reorganization involves the re-assignment of most violation of probation cases. Although most persons accused of probation violation are arrested, many can be released after their alleged violation is found to be technical in nature and it is determined they are not a danger to society.

Judge Demers’ plan, which has been in effect since February assigns most of those technical violation cases to one judge and mandates three hearings a week so that the alleged probation violators and their attorneys have an opportunity to argue for their release as quickly as possible. With judges in Criminal Division no longer handling felony advisories, Criminal Administrative Judge Robert J. Morris was able to fine tune assignments, placing the violation of probation hearings on his calendars.

Caddell said the new courtroom was the final phase of the plan “to make the system run more smoothly. It shows what government agencies can do when we work together to provide the best services in a cost-efficient manner. We are grateful that the county appreciated the Court’s need for expansion.

“And Pinellas County taxpayers should be proud of its employees, who have demonstrated their professionalism, pride and outstanding quality in taking the care to produce a first-rate addition to the court facilities at CJC.”