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Judge Morris to Be New Chief Judge, Succeeding Judge Demers on July 1

CLEARWATER – Circuit Judge Robert J. Morris Jr. has been elected as the next chief judge of the Sixth Judicial Circuit.

Judge Morris – unanimously elected at a February judges meeting – will assume his new position on July 1, succeeding Circuit Judge David A. Demers, who has led the Circuit for the past six years. Chief judges are constitutionally responsible for the administrative supervision of the courts and court staff within their circuit.

Judge Demers, who did not seek re-election to the position, said “The Sixth Judicial Circuit is fortunate to have someone with the qualifications and dedication of Robert Morris. I am confident he will do an excellent job of leading us.”



Judge Morris



Judge Demers

Judge Morris lauded accomplishments of the man he will succeed, particularly in 2004, when Judge Demers guided the Circuit through one of the most significant evolutions in court history. That transition converted Florida’s courts from a system that was mostly funded by county governments to a system with uniform state funding in each of the 20 circuits. Following up on the transition, Judge Demers has been a member of the Trial Courts Budget Commission, the court system’s critical link to the Legislature.

Judge Demers said any accomplishments during his tenure have been because of “a team effort – judges, judicial assistants and staff working together.” Other undertakings led by Judge Demers have included:

- An overhaul of the way Court Reporting is done. The Circuit has transitioned from a system of contract reporters to employee reporters and recently completed the installation in all courthouses of a digital court reporting system.
- Expansion into Pasco County of the highly successful Drug Court program that gives addicted citizens an opportunity to rehabilitate while having criminal charges dropped from their records. And just this year, with Judge Demers’ direction, the Circuit established a pilot Dependency Drug Court program to assist the parents in families in danger of being broken up because of drug addiction by one or both parents.

- The implementation of a cohesive emergency management plan that ensures the continued operation of the courts' crucial functions if the area is immobilized by a hurricane or other catastrophic event.
- The renovation of the courthouse in St. Petersburg and a major addition to the courthouse in New Port Richey.

The Sixth Circuit, comprised of courts in Pasco and Pinellas Counties, serves almost 1.5 million residents. Last year, new case filings totaled more than 407,000, an increase of more than 35% since Judge Demers became chief judge. That increase in workload has caused the Legislature to grow the number of judgeships from 55 in 2001 to the current 69 – 45 circuit judges and 24 county judges. They preside over court proceedings in nine locations and are supported by an administrative staff of approximately 250.

While praising accomplishment of the past six years, Judge Morris says he recognizes his term will bring new issues. “We are clearly in a time of transition,” he said, citing challenges the courts will face in these areas:

- The courts' continued participation in the ongoing technological transformation toward a paperless society;
- Court facilities that are operating at capacity;
- Jail facilities that are seriously overcrowded;
- A continuing population explosion in Pasco County and the need for the additional court facilities and services that such growth creates;
- The large number of new judges; because of caseload growth and retirements, 20 new judges have been seated in the past two years.

Currently the Administrative Judge of the Circuit's Criminal Division in Pinellas, Judge Morris has been on the bench since 1997, when he was appointed to a vacant county judgeship by Gov. Lawton Chiles. His tenure on the circuit bench began in 2002 after he was appointed by Gov. Jeb Bush. Because of his expertise in Family Law, then-Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice Barbara J. Pariente appointed him in 2004 to chair the Supreme Court Steering Committee on Families and Children in the Court. And last year, Florida Supreme Court Chief Justice R. Fred Lewis appointed him to a six-year term on the state's Trial Court Budget Commission.

Before becoming a judge, he was a practicing lawyer for 17 years, earning a Martindale Hubbell rating of AV, the highest rating given by the leading organization that rates lawyers. He is a graduate of Tarpon Springs High School and earned a bachelor of science degree from the University of Florida College of Journalism and a juris doctorate from DePaul University College of Law.