



Photo courtesy Mohave County

Associate Presiding Judge Richard Weiss (from left), Presiding Judge Randolph Bartlett, Clerk of the Court Virlynn Tinnell and Court Administrator Kip Anderson pose prior to an interview at the Mohave County Administration Building in Kingman Monday, Aug. 4. The group discussed the new Mohave County Courts Strategic Plan 2008 – 2012.

Courts look to the future with strategic plan

KINGMAN – Mohave County Presiding Judge Randolph Bartlett unveiled the Courts Strategic Plan, 2008 – 2012, during the Board of Supervisors meeting Monday, Aug. 4, at the County Administration Building in Kingman.

Following the Board meeting, Judge Bartlett, Judge Richard Weiss, Clerk of the Court Virlynn Tinnell and Court Administrator Kip Anderson were interviewed concerning the new five-year strategic plan.

“In January of 2007, the Mohave County Courts began laying the groundwork for the development of a plan for the future of the courts,” Anderson said. “Early this year, with the input of stakeholders and court users, along with the guidance of Dr. Brenda Wagenknecht-Ivey of Praxis Consulting, Inc., a committee of 17 court staff and judges began working to create this Strategic Plan, which was finalized in July.”

Within the plan are five strategic issue areas broken up into prioritized projects that have been assigned to specific teams “with a timetable to be completed by 2009,” Bartlett said. “We have started on several of these projects. Each team consists of co-leaders, team members and a judicial liaison. The liaisons report back to the administration. We also have a monitoring team that oversees the other teams so we don’t drop the ball.

“That monitoring team is Kip, Virlynn, Bunnie Morey and me,” Bartlett said.

Strategic Issue Area 1 concerns access and customer service. The projects are: Improve phone system; Conduct customer survey; Interactive and standardized forms project; Establish information desk; Expand hours of the courts. Co-leaders of Area 1 are Virlynn Tinnell and Linda Yarbrough. The team consists of Lori Linn, Elaine Grissom, Della Hiser and Angela Jackson and the judicial liaison is Judge Jill Davis.

The Superior Court conducted a customer survey in August, 2007.

“As a result of that survey, we learned that the focus was too broad for us to be able to pinpoint any improvements or lack of improvements,” Tinnell said. “We are going to make that more focused on specific groups. One day we will do jurors and then follow up in three months and again three months later and so on. We’ll do a lot of smaller surveys which will help us gauge our weaknesses and strengths. People will be asked to identify themselves and why they were in the court.” She explained that some people are obviously not happy to be in court, such as some witnesses, some victims and some family members of the accused.

They will be asked if they were treated fairly, understood the process and knew the next step, she said, “such as, does he or she know whether to go to probation or jail or not.”

Another Area 1, priority 1 issue is standardized forms, Anderson said. “That one will be a huge benefit to the courts and the customers.”

“We are getting more individuals who do not have attorneys,” Bartlett said.

“These new forms are user-friendly and can help these people through the system.”

Expanding the hours of the courts is a priority 3 level project.

“A lot of people have jobs during the day and it is very inconvenient for them to go (to court) during the day,” he said. “We are looking at possibly doing some night courts and try to be as flexible and accessible to the public as possible.”

The economy is an issue in funding all projects as Proposition 101 has limited property tax revenues on existing properties to a 2 percent annual increase while fuel and other expenses are not capped. The courts have to budget from county funding, state funding, fees and grants.

“Consequently, most of these projects assigned to the teams are ones that we can accomplish with minimal funding,” Bartlett said. “We know how hard things are right now. There is not a lot of money out there. But, times will change.”

Mohave County is one of the places projected to recover faster than other areas, he said. When the economy does turn around, the groundwork for some of the projects will be done and the courts will be ready to expand.

“There are court rules that will perhaps force all courts to expand their hours,” Weiss said. “With juvenile dependency cases, there will be a rule mandating that all kids attend their court hearings. That would almost force the courts to have evening hours.”

“With the remodel of the courthouse in Kingman, we are looking at developing an information desk,” Bartlett said. “If you look at the particular projects, you will see we already have the money for some things. For example, purchase of a site for Moccasin Justice Court. The Justices of the Peace have the money to go forward with that. The court expansion, remodel in Kingman – we have the money and that is underway as we speak. The others, we are working on. Court security will require some work. Hopefully we will get funding from other sources to get the equipment we need to enhance security in all our court facilities.”

“There is also a list of priorities we want to pursue when we do get funding,” Anderson said, “such as the Law and Justice Center which is part of Strategic Issue Area 3, Court Facilities.”

Other strategic areas that are listed in the strategic plan are: Fair and timely resolution of disputes; Community understanding and support; and Motivated, competent and professional judges and staff.

The last issue “is not a criticism of our existing staff,” Bartlett said. “It is to be at the very edge of everything. I think Mohave County Courts are in great shape thanks to Virlynn and Kip, but we have to look to the future. Our judges are getting older. I’m not going to be the presiding judge forever. Someone else will have to step up to the plate. Judges are professionals. They are independent. And they are elected officials. It requires a lot of skills keeping things going in the same direction. We also have to continue to improve the overall quality of staff – making sure they receive the proper training.

“We need to implement a new case-management software system (AJACS),” he said, which was built with the input of all stakeholders in the court system. “It can compare judges’ caseloads and find how long it takes each individual judge to handle specific kinds of cases.” The software is extremely valuable for the continued improvement of court services, he said.

“We are putting together a speakers’ bureau,” Anderson said. “Part of our focus is to reach out to the communities more and improve communication. Our judicial staff members are going out and meeting regularly with other branches of government in an attempt to collaborate better.”

“We put on mock trials in the schools,” Bartlett said, “and that was quite successful. The students loved it. We believe, the better educated the public is about the justice system, the better they will understand what our roles are and why we do what we do.”

The complete 34-page Mohave County Courts Strategic Plan 2008 – 2012 can be found on the internet at: <http://www.mohavecourts.com/>

“We are asking people to give us feedback,” Bartlett said. “We are going out to the communities to give presentations on our plans and I think the residents will be pleased and will know they have access to us.”

“This is not a strategic plan that will sit on a shelf and gather dust,” Weiss said. “With our process, we have people involved up front who will stay involved and make sure things happen.”

Presentations concerning the strategic plan will be made at all three city council chambers: Lake Havasu City, Tuesday, Aug. 12, at 6 p.m.; Kingman, Monday, Aug. 18, at 6 p.m.; Bullhead City, Tuesday, Sept. 2, at 5:30 p.m.

“I think this is an opportunity for the Mohave County Board of Supervisors to see how dedicated we are in trying to serve our communities while also working in conjunction with our Board,” Bartlett said. “We are very appreciative of the support that we have had from the Board, and we look forward to working closer with them while providing quality services to our communities.”