



COURT'S JUDICIAL CIRCUIT ASSESSMENT COMMITTEE WORK IS UNDERWAY

📅 Aug 01, 2023 👤 By Jim Ash

The Judicial Circuit Assessment Committee has no preconceived notions as it carries out Chief Justice Carlos Muñiz's order to review whether the consolidation of Florida's 20 judicial circuits is warranted, a committee member told the Board of Governors last week.

"We're going to do this with a very open mind," Naples attorney **Laird Lile** told the board at a July 28 meeting in Sarasota. "The chief justice really wants us to give this a good look and to make a report."

President Scott Westheimer noted that Lile, a veteran board member, serves on the committee with another veteran board member, Jacksonville attorney Braxton Gillam.

Westheimer said he has been swamped with inquiries since Muñiz issued *In Re: Judicial Circuit Assessment Committee*, AOSC23-35, on June 30.



Laird Lile

"I've received a ton of input on that," Westheimer said. "The prosecuting attorneys association is against it. I've heard from the public defenders who are against it."

The order refers to the Legislature's recent approval of a new Sixth District Court of Appeal, which began with a district court assessment committee, as contemplated by Rule of General Practice and Judicial Administration 2.241.

Muñiz's latest order notes that the rule requires assessments to "balance the potential impact and disruption caused by changes in judicial circuits...against the need to address circumstances that limit the quality and efficiency of, and public confidence in, the judicial process."

Muñiz's order was prompted by a June 15 letter from Speaker Paul Renner. The letter notes that the current boundaries of the judicial circuits have remained in place since 1969, "notwithstanding the significant population and demographic changes of the past 50 years."

"Speaker Renner suggests that consolidation of judicial circuits might generate substantial cost savings and increase public trust and confidence in the judiciary through greater efficiency and uniformity in the judicial process," the order states.

"Without expressing any view on the merits at this time, the Court agrees that the question of whether there is a need to consolidate Florida's judicial circuits deserves thoughtful consideration and careful study."

The order stresses that the Supreme Court, before recommending any change in "judicial structure," must consider "less disruptive adjustments" to judicial branch operations.

The order sets a December 1 deadline for the committee to submit its recommendations.

Lawmakers convene the next 60-day regular session in January, with interim committee weeks scheduled to begin in September. With a tight deadline, Westheimer urged board members to forward comments to committee members as soon as possible.

Chaired by Fourth District Court of Appeal Judge Jonathan Gerber, the assessment committee also includes 12th Judicial Circuit Chief Judge Diana Moreland, Miami-Dade Public Defender Carlos Martinez, Fourth Judicial Circuit State Attorney Melissa Nelson, and Polk County Circuit Court Clerk & Comptroller Stacy Butterfield, to name a few.

The committee is conducting its next public hearing August 4, from 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. The committee webpage invites the public to register at [this link](#).

Lile urged fellow board members to remind their constituents that The Florida Bar did not initiate the review.

He also stressed that the order directs the committee to review consolidation of circuits within each of Florida's six district court of appeal boundaries.

One of four numbered directions in the order states, "in making its findings and recommendations, the Committee must assume that district court of appeal boundaries remain unchanged."

"Actually, those assignments, those consolidations, can only happen within, according to the order, within the current district court boundaries," Lile said. "So, we really have to look within each district court boundaries, to see if any of those circuits could be combined for administrative convenience. It's just a little more of a refined perspective on that."

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