



An Operational Review of the Lee's Summit Municipal Court

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Performed by:



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SERVED™**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----|
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| The Current Environment | 2 |
| 1. The Courtroom | 4 |
| 2. Security | 6 |
| 3. Facilities | 7 |
| 4. Probation Issues | 7 |
| 5. Lee's Summit Police Department Issues | 8 |
| 6. Prosecution Issues | 10 |
| 7. Financial Issues | 11 |
| 8. Reporting Relationships | 12 |
| 9. Other City Departments | 14 |
| 10. Technology Issues | 15 |
| Appendix A – Summary of Recommendations | A-1 |
| Appendix B – Risk versus Benefit and Responsibility Matrix | B-1 |
| Appendix C – Suggestions for improving the court's website | C-1 |

Executive Summary

This report of an operational review of the Lee's Summit Municipal Court contains several recommendations for improvement of a court that, based on our observations and on input from those we interviewed during our visit, is already exceptionally well-run. But no matter how well managed a court may be there is always room for improvement.

The even better news is that while sharing some of our early conclusions with court leadership, our recommendations were largely embraced and in some instances implementation is already under way.

We organize this report to describe the current environment, outline recommendations in category order and end with a chapter entitled "The Future." We felt a description of the current environment was needed in order to justify our opinion about how well the court is managed. The topical organization of our recommendations is only a matter of convenience. "The Future" chapter is offered as a broad plan to address long-range planning, policy and technology issues as the court moves forward.

Finally, two appendices are provided that (A) summarize the recommendations, and (B) rank them with our assessment of each recommendation's difficulty versus benefit along with an indication of which entities are affected. The matrix in Appendix B may be used by the court and the city as a tool to decide which recommendations are worth the effort to implement and in which order they should be addressed. We encourage the court and the city to make their own assessments of risk versus return, and to use our assessments as advisory.

Additionally, Appendix C gives specific recommendations for improving the court's website to provide better service to the public.

It is our privilege to have conducted this operational review, and we offer our sincere best wishes to the court as it continuously improves its already commendable levels of customer service and administration of justice.

The Current Environment

When contractors are brought into a court to conduct an audit or operational review, it is usually because there are problems. This is not the case in the Lee's Summit Municipal Court. As a result, the recommendations contained in this report are less of a criticism of how the court is managed, and more of a path forward to continued excellence.

It is insufficient to merely state that the clerk's office and court are managed well; here is why:

Performance-based Management – The court has embraced a program of performance-based management utilizing CourTools¹ measurement criteria that are applicable to this jurisdiction. Court management has begun this commendable journey on its own with the full support of the bench. The results of these measurements guide policy formation concerning timely case disposition, public service and human resource management. For instance, public surveys indicated that the court's website was not particularly useful; accordingly, court management is embarking on a website makeover, and we recommend some tips in this regard in our TECHNOLOGY chapter and in Appendix C.

Consultation with Stakeholders – The court holds regular monthly meetings with key stakeholders in an effort to identify problems and resolve operational conflicts. Again, this is commendable and indicative of forward-thinking management, tempered only by our Recommendation 8-C to include the Public Defender in this effort.

Clerk's Office Efficiency – There are clear delineations of responsibilities within the clerk's office, with sufficient flexibility to allow intervention without fear of reprimand when court staff sees something amiss. Even though the staff is small, the clerks are efficient and there are promotional and growth opportunities within the existing salaried positions.

Files – We were told several times by different parties that the staff has *never* lost a file. Court staff take pride in this accomplishment and work hard to maintain their reputation. We looked at the current filing methods with the aim for improvement but found nothing worthy of note. Our recommendations in the chapter entitled THE FUTURE suggest technological advances to make the court less reliant on paper files, but these recommendations would only enhance the status quo.

¹ The CourTools are ten measurement criteria distilled from the Trial Court Performance Standards (TCPS). The effort to develop TCPS began in 1987 as a collaboration between the National Center for State Courts and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (of the US Department of Justice). Its purpose is to provide a common language for describing, classifying, and measuring the performance of trial courts and it has become an invaluable resource for enhancing a court's ability to provide fair and efficient adjudication and disposition of cases. Courts are encouraged to pick from among ten CourTools measurement criteria those that are most applicable to local need. For additional information and TCPS implementation resources, see http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/TCPS/index.html. For details concerning the CourTools, visit www.courttools.org.

Court Finances – Municipal courts receive a large amount of revenue. This poses a challenge to maintain appropriate checks and balances to not only safeguard against defalcation, but to ensure that correct amounts of revenue are distributed to the appropriate entities in a timely fashion. We could see no flaws in the court's accounting systems and protocols.

Calendars – Too many courts schedule “cattle calls” where vast numbers of court cases are scheduled for one morning and one afternoon session, resulting in significant wait times and co-mingling of cases, some of which require little or no attention, with those cases needing much attention. The Lee's Summit Municipal Court calendars are staggered with certain case types clustered for efficiency and economies of scale. There is little we would do to improve the present calendar, except adjusting police officer scheduling (Recommendation 5-A) and possibly modifying the court's current plans to migrate away from a traditional late night setting (Recommendation 1-D).

The Facility – Too often, courts are housed in substandard facilities that are unattractive, lack appropriate functionality and have insufficient space for present and future needs. While the judges and clerk's office would happily accept more space, the current facility is attractive, modern, well-appointed and functional. Considering the high traffic of court patrons in the courtroom, it has held up nicely in its ten-year history. Added security measures have not significantly diminished the courtroom's utility.

It is not that one or two of these positive aspects were present in the court; so many aspects of court management are well-run, and combined, they exceed the sum of their parts in terms of good customer service, a focus on what is important and the potential for continued improvement. The recommendations in this report are intended to assist the court in its continuing journey to excellence.

1. The Courtroom

The following recommendations would improve the current courtroom operations:

RECOMMENDATION 1-A: A flat screen television monitor should be installed on the wall behind the witness box and the image of defendants being arraigned or otherwise heard remotely by videoconference should be shown on the screen to enable audience members open access to these court proceedings.

In the previous chapter of this report which addressed THE CURRENT ENVIRONMENT, the Trial Court Performance Standards were mentioned in relation to the court's use of CourTools performance measurement criteria. There is a particular section of the Trial Court Performance Standards² that addresses the need for court hearings to be open and accessible. This means that all who are present in court should be able to hear and see what is occurring at a public proceeding.

It is commendable that the court uses videoconference technology to remotely arraign and conduct non-evidentiary proceedings with selected defendants in custody in either the Lee's Summit Police Department jail or at the contract detention center. Doing so reduces prisoner transportation costs for low-impact hearings, and lessens the security risk to those in the courtroom. However, the image of the defendants in these hearings is only seen by the judge on a computer monitor at the bench.

In order for the public to view the entire proceeding, a flat screen television monitor should be installed on the wall behind the witness box and the image of defendants being arraigned or otherwise heard remotely by videoconference should be shown on the screen. We also note at one of the proceedings we observed that the camera capturing the judge's image shown to the defendant can sometimes slip, so that the defendant is not able to see the judge. In order to reduce these instances, a picture-in-picture feature should be used to enable the judge to see what the defendant sees. If the court is able to do this, both images should be shown on the flat screen television viewable by the public. We recommend a minimum 37-inch screen size in order to be viewable throughout the courtroom.

In order to maximize the investment of public funds for this purpose, we further recommend that one of the judges videotape the reading of the rights and other repeated announcements made at various times of the day. This videotape would provide two added benefits: consistency in the announcements and relieving the judge of this repeated duty.

² Ibid., Trial Court Performance Standards, Access to Justice performance area, Measure 1.1.1: [Access To Open Hearings](http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/tcps/Measures/me_1.1.1.htm), which states, "This measure verifies that the public has access to court proceedings that should be open to the public." See http://www.ncsconline.org/D_Research/tcps/Measures/me_1.1.1.htm for more information.

RECOMMENDATION 1-B: Install a multi-directional microphone so that parties in front of the bench may be heard by the audience; a mute switch for this microphone should be accessible by the judge.

As is referenced in the previous recommendation, the public has a need for open access to court proceedings; this includes the ability to hear what occurs in court. Currently, the parties appearing in court do so at the front of the bench and in facing the bench the acoustics are hindered for all except the judge.

The installation of a multi-directional microphone would cure this situation but care should be taken in the choice of microphone and its placement to ensure that the most effective solution is chosen. Finally, a mute button should be provided so the judge is able to shut off the audio during sensitive proceedings that are not entirely open to the public (such as medical issues involving mental health cases, etc.).

RECOMMENDATION 1-C: Install a short, half-moon shaped shelf at the foot of the bench to provide a more secure distance between parties and the bench, and to provide a convenient resting place for paperwork.

Currently, the court allows attorneys and parties to approach the bench for the purpose of testimony and court interaction. Too often, the close proximity of the parties to the judge requires admonition to not lean on the bench and to keep an appropriate distance.

The construction and installation of a short, half-moon shaped shelf at the foot of the bench would provide a natural barrier to prevent too-close proximity, while also providing convenient space to place the party's paperwork while a matter is being heard.

RECOMMENDATION 1-D: At the time the court makes final calendar changes to migrate away from the late night calendar, public feedback should be sought to determine whether there is a need for a once-per-month night court for the purpose of hearing minor offense arraignments and non-evidentiary matters.

The court currently plans to migrate away from a traditional late night setting, in which one particular calendar does not begin until 3 p.m. or later and routinely runs until late at night (although this condition is less prevalent than in the past due to changes in the rest of the court's calendar). When this transition is complete, which is expected to occur after the next judicial election cycle, continuing to set a small 3 p.m. calendar in conjunction with a normal daytime calendar should provide sufficient convenience for those who have trouble appearing during traditional hours. If public feedback indicates a need, the court should consider scheduling a once-per-month night court for the purpose of hearing minor offense arraignments and non-evidentiary matters. Unless the prosecutor, Lee's Summit Police Department or other citing agencies wish to participate, this night court should not include contested matters in which government agency witnesses are required to appear and testify.

2. Security

The following recommendations would improve the court's security:

RECOMMENDATION 2-A: Add a panic button at the clerk's station in the courtroom and in the judges' chambers.

There are panic buttons strategically located in the clerk's office, probation office and courtroom, but there is no panic button at the clerk's station in the courtroom or in chambers. There is sufficient risk to justify adding this security feature. The current panic buttons alert the police department dispatch center.

RECOMMENDATION 2-B: Either replace the courtroom audience seating or secure the existing seats so they cannot be used as weapons.

While the courtroom itself is modern, attractively designed and well-kept, the audience seating consists of loose metal and plastic chairs that could easily be used as weapons. This is a security risk and the chairs should either be secured or replaced with more secure seating.

Because this courtroom handles a high volume of traffic, any replacement seating would have to be durable in order to withstand the wear and tear.

RECOMMENDATION 2-C: Require attorneys without court-issued picture identification to go through security screening before entering the courtroom.

The 16th Circuit Court of Jackson County issues picture identification to attorneys for the purpose of firm identification so these attorneys may bypass security screening in the various courthouses of that jurisdiction. Currently, any attorney who shows a Bar card along with a picture identification is able to bypass security screening at the Lee's Summit Municipal Court.

A Bar card is not sufficient identification because it does not include picture identification. We recommend that any attorney not in possession of a picture identification issued by the Circuit Court be subject to security screening.

RECOMMENDATION 2-D: The radio frequency used by the bailiffs should be one that is compatible with the Lee's Summit Police Department so the police officer providing extra security on the days the court is in session is able to monitor communications.

The current radio frequencies used by the bailiff and the Lee's Summit Police Department are not interoperable, which could result in delayed response in the event of an emergency or security breach. The Lee's Summit Police Department radios have extra bands available, one of which could serve this purpose.

On days the court is in session, a Lee's Summit Police Department officer is routinely assigned to provide back-up and to secure the public hallway outside the courtroom. If the radios were interoperable, this officer could monitor the bailiff's frequency and be alerted in the event of an emergency.

3. Facilities

The following recommendation would improve the court facilities:

RECOMMENDATION 3: Improve signage at the clerk's office and courtroom; avoid the use of paper signage.

While most signage at the court is very good, there are some paper signs placed outside the courtroom or taped to the window at the public counter. If a sign is necessary, it should be professionally made. If for some reason a paper sign is needed for a very short time, it should be direct, unambiguous, large enough to be easily read, and have proper grammar and spelling.

4. Probation Issues

The following recommendations would improve the Probation Office:

RECOMMENDATION 4-A: Purchase and install the probation-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system.

The municipal court uses Tyler Technology's InCode case management software. InCode has developed a module specific to Probation, which tracks probationers and provides management reports. This module should be purchased and installed for use in the Lee's Summit Probation Department.

RECOMMENDATION 4-B: Generate a report from the new probation automated system indicating which defendants are on probation, for what offense, the duration of probation and the original citing agency (for example, Lee's Summit Police Department, code enforcement, animal control, etc.), and share this report with the appropriate departments.

Currently citing agencies do not have formal and consistent information about defendants who have been convicted and sentenced to probation. This information can be especially useful for issues which are ongoing, such as code enforcement violations. If the citing agency knows when a defendant's probation is about to expire, officers can determine if a defendant has violated probation while there is still time to inform the court and take additional appropriate action.

5. Lee's Summit Police Department Issues

Lee's Summit Municipal Court and Lee's Summit Police Department (LSPD) are the major tenants of the same facility. Nearly all of the misdemeanor and infractions filed by LSPD are heard in the court and there is no other law enforcement agency filing cases with the court. The two agencies also share limited data system connectivity that enables LSPD filing information to populate the court's data system, and dispositions and warrants from the court to populate the LSPD data system. LSPD provides extra security during court calendar days.

In short, the court has a close working relationship with LSPD. The following recommendations address issues related to LSPD:

RECOMMENDATION 5-A: Modify the police officer court appearance schedule to require attendance in court only when there is a subpoena for a contested hearing.

Police officers are scheduled to appear in court on a regular schedule that divides each month into a matrix and each court day into several slots into which officers are assigned on an ongoing basis, regardless of whether a trial is scheduled or there is other clear indication of the need for the officer's presence. This practice is not productive for several reasons:

- It produces a significant overtime expense to the city for officer appearances in court when their presence is not always necessary.
- It overly complicates coordination of an officer's appearance by creating an elaborate regular appearance matrix.
- Officers are rarely informed of matters in which they are required to testify, and therefore have often not prepared properly by reviewing their notes and/or bringing along needed evidence.
- The practice does not utilize the built-in functionality of the court's automated case management software that has officer scheduling functionality (see our Recommendation 10-B).

The prosecutor has the current ability to use the court's automated case management software to subpoena officers and evidence, which could easily send an electronic record to LSPD to help coordinate officer appearances when needed. Moreover, our Recommendation 10-B would authorize the LSPD to enter officer schedules in the court's automated case management software; this would support automated query into when a particular officer would be available for the purpose of setting cases on the court's calendar.

Some officers, such as those who are primarily assigned to traffic enforcement, will write a large number of citations each month and therefore may be required to appear on a regular basis for contested matters. However, there are a large number of officers who do not fall into this category and should not be expected to appear in court in the chance that they may be needed for some ad hoc purpose.

RECOMMENDATION 5-B: Modify the police data system to better track evidence in storage in order to facilitate timely disposition.

Like most city police departments, LSPD takes a lot of physical evidence into custody, which cannot be returned or destroyed (as the case may be) until the underlying criminal case is disposed and its appeal period has lapsed. The police and court have current data exchange protocols in which new cases are electronically sent from the police to the court and disposition and warrant information is sent from the court to the police. This information should be modified as follows:

- Include filing of an appeal in the information sent from the court to the police, and
- Modify the police data system to use the court's case disposition and appeal notification to better track evidence disposition.

6. Prosecution Issues

The following recommendations address prosecution issues:

RECOMMENDATION 6-A: Purchase and install the prosecution-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system. Until this occurs, the prosecutor's office should make use of InCode functionality currently available to them.

As with probation, InCode has developed a module specific to the prosecutor's office. This module should be purchased and installed for use in the Lee's Summit city prosecutor's office.

The prosecutor's office is currently hampered by the use of dysfunctional manual processes which are very labor intensive. The office has access to InCode for specific purposes, such as reports which list the cases scheduled for a particular court calendar or cases which require the attendance of witnesses. However, clerical staff in the prosecutor's office do not take advantage of these tools and instead rely on their manual systems which require time-consuming and redundant processes. For example, prosecutor case files are filed alphabetically, which requires the staff to repeatedly review each file to ensure it is pulled for the appropriate court date. InCode will generate a list of cases scheduled for court so staff can quickly pull needed case files.

RECOMMENDATION 6-B: After installation of InCode for the prosecutor's office, give the prosecutor online access in the courtroom and to the state's ALERT system to enable them to inquire and track existing and prior cases.

It is essential to the prosecution's case to know a defendant's criminal history. The prosecutors need ready access to both their own records and to the State of Missouri's ALERT system, which has arrest and conviction information. Access in the courtroom would allow the prosecutor to make informed decisions about trying a case or discussing potential plea agreements with defendants.

RECOMMENDATION 6-C: With the time saved by using InCode, provide advocacy services to victims.

While we were not charged with reviewing the operations in the prosecutor's office, we heard from several sources that there is a need for victim advocacy services. It is likely that use of InCode will free up at least half of a clerical employee's time, which can then be used to assist victims.

RECOMMENDATION 6-D: Relieve the prosecutor of the responsibility for writing citations for animal control or code enforcement violations.

This issue is explored more fully in Recommendation 9. Currently the prosecutor keeps a citation book and when other city departments other than the LSPD want to issue a citation, they present a written report to the prosecutor's office and the prosecutor actually writes the citation. This process is needlessly complicated and time consuming and should be stopped.

7. Financial Issues

The following recommendations address financial issues:

RECOMMENDATION 7-A: Create an accounts receivable unit in the City Attorney's Office to enforce compliance with delinquent accounts. This unit could handle other city department delinquent accounts as well.

Currently the court issues warrants for defendants who fail to pay their fines. Although the Lee's Summit Police Department is unusual in that officers actively work these warrants, this is an expensive undertaking and is often not successful in actually compelling payment.

A more effective method of enforcing fines and penalties, and therefore ensuring justice is served, is to actively use collections techniques to promote payment by defendants. The court should make the initial attempts (sending notices) and if unsuccessful, refer the case to a newly created accounts receivables unit in the City Attorney's office. This unit could use specialized software³ that can generate notices, skip trace bad addresses and pursue other collection strategies. The revenue enhancement from this unit could be significant, both from the court and from other city departments.

RECOMMENDATION 7-B: Authorize an accounts payable fee to be imposed when defendants are unable to satisfy fine sanctions immediately and accounts receivable (and especially installment payments) are required to be established.

The best way to collect fines is to insist they be paid at the time they are ordered. However, not all defendants are in a financial position to make full payment, especially when fines are large, such as for driving under the influence. In such a situation, a substantial initial payment followed by another single payment or monthly payments (for a specified limited time) are reasonable.

The court incurs a cost when fines are not paid immediately. Defendants, like other consumers, do not expect to be able to pay off a debt over time with no interest or administrative costs. The court or city should establish an administrative fee to cover the costs of establishing the account, sending notices, and accounting for partial payments. When considering whether to pursue this recommendation, review the enabling statute to determine where the revenue from such a fee would go.

RECOMMENDATION 7-C: Traffic and minor offense fines are low and should be raised to be in closer alignment with neighboring jurisdictions and to serve as a deterrent.

Fines as sanctions for traffic and minor offense violations serve the primary purpose of deterring repeat offenses. In order to be effective, they should be in alignment with neighboring jurisdictions, many of which have higher fines in comparison to Lee's Summit. These fines should be reviewed and adjusted accordingly.

³ Although there may be multiple software packages available to assist in-house processing of accounts receivable, we have found one in particular to be cost effective and loaded with optional features. That software is available through www.RevQ.com.

8. Reporting Relationships

These recommendations address reporting relationships:

RECOMMENDATION 8-A: The city Finance Director should have direct oversight as to court revenue collection, distribution, safeguarding and accounting checks and balances, but not supervisory control over the court administrator.

Because the court and city currently enjoy productive relationships and the internal operations of the court are so well-run, it is easy to overlook reporting relationships that are unclear and could cause problems in difficult times. One of these relationships involves the city finance director and the court administrator.

The judiciary is a third and separate branch of government, notwithstanding the city serving as its funding authority. The judges are elected officials with an obligation to account for the court's responsible use of public resources, and with direct oversight over the administration of the court through a court administrator.

The Lee's Summit City Charter provides (in part) in Section 7.3 entitled Court Administration:

The Council shall provide for a Court Administrator, clerks and other personnel for the Municipal Court, with management assistance from the department which administers the financial affairs of the city. The judges of the Municipal Court shall appoint, suspend or remove, and render the annual performance review of the Court Administrator, in consultation with that department director.

We defer to the judgment of the Law Department of the city as to the actual language change to Section 7.3 that is needed to implement this recommendation, but we suggest the following:

The Council shall provide for a Court Administrator, clerks and other personnel for the Municipal Court, with ~~management~~ financial oversight and accounting assistance from the department which administers the financial affairs of the city. The judges of the Municipal Court shall appoint, suspend or remove, and render the annual performance review of the Court Administrator, ~~in consultation with that department director.~~

RECOMMENDATION 8-B: The bailiffs and probation staff should report directly to the Court Administrator.

The other reporting relationships in need of clarification are those of the court administrator, bailiffs and probation. Currently, the bailiffs and manager of probation report to the judges. While the judges are ultimately responsible for the overall administration of the court, it is the court administrator who should be responsible for

the actual management of the court, which includes effective security and probation operations.

It is not that the judges are incapable of supervising other court entities, but it is a matter of clear command and effective management. This relationship is similar to a city manager's relationship with the mayor and city council, or a chief executive officer with a board of directors. The judges should set policy and the court administrator should execute that policy.

As previously noted in this chapter, current relations are productive and cordial, but this may not always be the case. Rather than clear up these reporting relationships if and when communication deteriorates, it is best to address them now in a preemptive manner.

RECOMMENDATION 8-C: Include a public defender representative in the regular meetings of court stakeholders.

It is commendable that the court regularly convenes meetings with other justice agency representatives to address issues of mutual concern. Doing so not only serves as a forum to discuss problems, but as a regular communication tool to coordinate changes in procedures, forms and protocols.

When we asked who regularly attended, we noted the absence of a public defender representative. Those with whom we shared this observation all agreed that the omission was merely an oversight and the future inclusion of a public defender representative would be a positive addition.

9. Other City Departments

The following recommendations address issues related to other city departments:

RECOMMENDATION 9: Allow city Code Enforcement and Animal Control officials to write citations, file them electronically with the court, and have read-only access to the court's automated case processing system.

Several city entities bring matters before the court for resolution, including the Police Department, Animal Control and Code Enforcement. Only the Police Department currently has the authority (with some limitations) to write citations and file them electronically with the court, while the hard copies of the citations are sent to the City Prosecutor for review. If the City Prosecutor decides there is insufficient cause to prosecute a particular police-generated citation, the case is "filed" and then dismissed. This is not a good procedure for several reasons indicated below.

Currently and excluding exceptionally minor offenses, Animal Control and Code Enforcement officials must submit a written recommendation to the City Prosecutor to "file" a case, which is accomplished by the Prosecutor writing a citation. Written citations are then sent to the court for data entry, while the originating city department may or may not be aware that a case is filed, what charges have been lodged or what date the case has been set to be heard on the calendar. Both the Animal Control and Code Enforcement offices use case tracking software into which the case particulars are entered.

Currently, the electronic data exchange between the court and police is two-way, with the police sending new case information to the court and the court sending disposition and warrant data to the police.

We recommend that the same data exchange protocols be extended to and from the court, Animal Control and Code Enforcement. Moreover, except for pre-defined serious offenses, Animal Control and Code Enforcement officials should have the authority to write their own citations, transmit them electronically to the court and send paper copies with supporting documentation to the prosecutor for review. The benefits of these changes are several and substantial. These changes would:

- Reduce delay in entry of cases into the court's automated case management system;
- Eliminate redundant data entry by the agency and court staff;
- Create an auditable "trail" that discourages inappropriate intervention;
- Advise the citing agency when warrants are issued;
- Advise the citing agency when cases are disposed, to allow planned disposition of held evidence and files; and
- Provide for more efficient use of Prosecutor resources.

Animal Control and Code Enforcement should also be given read-only access to the court's automated case management system to enable verification of case status and calendared events.

10. Technology Issues

The following recommendations address technology issues:

RECOMMENDATION 10-A: Invite InCode experts to give consultation as to how to maximize the use of the court's automated case management system.

InCode is a highly functional system with a large array of features to provide efficient case management. It is probable there are a number of capabilities court staff are not using to their fullest potential. Likely areas include management information reporting, data tables, and notices. InCode staff could review the court's use of the system and offer suggestions and training for improved usage.

In exchange, the court can allow InCode to use its operation as a model for other potential InCode customers. The Lee's Summit Municipal Court is an ideal showcase for possible buyers, due to its attractive and well-functioning facility, effective use of available resources, efficient and customer service-oriented staff, and forward-looking management. InCode would certainly benefit as much as the court from improving the use of the case management system.

RECOMMENDATION 10-B: Allow the Lee's Summit Police Department limited authority to build and maintain police officer schedules in InCode, so the court can use the schedules when calendaring cases that require an officer's presence in court.

As discussed in Recommendation 5-A , police officers have specified court days. Our recommendation is that officers only be called to court when their presence is known to be required. To that end, the court must know when an officer is available. InCode has a built-in police officer calendar table so that the court clerk can ask the system, "When is Officer Jones next available?" and schedule the hearing for that day. The clerks would first set the parameters for the police officer calendar table and thereafter the Lee's Summit Police Department should be given the authority to maintain it by indicating when a particular officer may be on vacation, in training or have some other scheduled absence.

RECOMMENDATION 10-C: Write customized Crystal reports in InCode and save the templates so the court can regularly run routine inquiries.

While InCode has built-in reporting capabilities, there are other reports which can be developed using Crystal reporting. Once these reports have been programmed, the template can be saved and named so court management can easily run them when needed. An example of a needed report is a list of undisposed cases with no future calendar date.

RECOMMENDATION 10-D: Review the court's website for clarity and usefulness. See specific recommendations in Appendix C.

11. The Future

The recommendations in the preceding chapters of this report address the near and mid-term planning needs of the court. In planning for the longer term, we offer these additional suggestions for areas where the court may wish to focus its future attention and make interim decisions accordingly.

RECOMMENDATION 11-A: Establish a neighborhood dispute resolution program utilizing mediation to resolve criminal and quasi-criminal matters.

A primary purpose of courts is to provide a forum for the resolution of disputes. Since the Lee's Summit Municipal Court does not handle disputes that are civil in nature, it is understandable that little attention is paid to mediation, as this is considered to be a widely-accepted means of resolving civil but not criminal disputes. However, the concept of restorative justice⁴ in victim-related criminal offenses has deep roots in history and in tribal courts.

Restorative justice is a theory of alternative dispute resolution that emphasizes repairing the harm caused by criminal behavior accomplished through cooperative processes that may include:

1. Identifying and taking steps to repair harm,
2. Involving all affected parties, and
3. Transforming the traditional relationship between communities and their governments in responding to crime.

Some of the programs typically identified with restorative justice include:

- Victim offender mediation
- Conferencing
- Circles
- Victim assistance
- Ex-offender assistance
- Restitution
- Community service

As anyone who has witnessed the problems associated with neighbor disputes involving barking dogs, fence placement or code enforcement can tell you, the root of the problem is rarely the offense itself; it usually lies in the relationships between the parties that, if left unresolved, will fester and grow into future problems. The city has been relatively successful thus far in addressing the myriad of dispute and compliance issues within its sphere of influence by bringing these matters to the municipal court. However, a more comprehensive approach should include mediation services that could prove effective by treating root problems and thereby resulting in a more lasting dispute resolution. While victim restitution is an important goal of any criminal justice endeavor, those familiar with neighborhood dispute resolution programs note that one of the most powerful outcomes from criminal mediation is often an apology.

⁴ For a list of frequently asked questions about restorative justice, visit the Victim Offender Mediation Association website at <http://www.voma.org/rjfaq.shtml>

The questions as to how a neighborhood dispute resolution program should be implemented, what matters would be brought to it, and how it would fit into current court processes are best left to the city and the court, but we offer some suggestions:

- Involve the local Bar and academic resources.
- Enable the court and prosecutor to refer cases as part of a diversion program.
- Enable various city departments to refer matters as part of administrative remedy before cases are filed with the court.
- Consider establishing the program under the city's Law Department.

RECOMMENDATION 11-B: Migrate the clerk's office handling of case files into electronic media to the furthest extent possible.

Courts of the future are often forecasted as being *paperless*. This is naïve wishful thinking. The advent of computers and photocopiers over the years has actually created opportunities for more use of paper because the multitude of court users can print electronic file information and photocopy case files. A more realistic concept of the technology future of courts is emerging in the form of paper-on-demand, which recognizes that there are appropriate times that paper is needed but unless a compelling case is made for paper, electronic processing is preferred.

In the circumstances specific to this court, case files are handled particularly well with a remarkable record of few or no lost files. Nonetheless, there is a significant amount of effort expended to retrieve, transport and update paper court files when court is in session, and an urgent need to bring these files back to the clerk's and probation offices in a timely fashion in order that fines may be posted and defendants may comply with the orders of the court.

It has been our experience that the most reluctant party to switch to an electronic file in the court environment is a judge. That does not appear to be the case in this court. Therefore the court is in an ideal position to migrate the clerk's office handling of case files into an electronic medium, recognizing that paper will need to be produced at appropriate processing points.

We use the term "migrate" for a good reason - this is usually an iterative process in which the court begins in small ways, building on its success as it progresses toward more and more electronic processing. Here is how we suggest to start:

- Continue pulling case files for the court calendar and allow the judge to continue using the paper file.
- As cases are resolved, require the clerk to docket the event at that time and print a referral sheet that is handed to the defendant before he/she leaves the courtroom.
- If the case is disposed and a fine or other compliance is required, the referral sheet could be used by the clerk's and/or probation offices to handle the transaction, with any resulting paperwork reunited with the paper file after the calendar is completed.
- Explore technologies such as tablet computers and digital ink as suitable methods to eventually migrate the judges away from relying on the paper file.

We are confident that the current court contractor for the automated case management system would assist the court in this endeavor at no or low cost in exchange for allowing the contractor to showcase successful implementation.

Appendix A – Summary of Recommendations

1. THE COURTROOM

RECOMMENDATION 1-A: A flat screen television monitor should be installed on the wall behind the witness box and the image of defendants being arraigned or otherwise heard remotely by videoconference should be shown on the screen to enable audience members open access to these court proceedings.

RECOMMENDATION 1-B: Install a multi-directional microphone so that parties in front of the bench may be heard by the audience; a mute switch for this microphone should be accessible by the judge.

RECOMMENDATION 1-C: Install a short, half-moon shaped shelf at the foot of the bench to provide a more secure distance between parties and the bench, and to provide a convenient resting place for paperwork.

RECOMMENDATION 1-D: At the time the court makes final calendar changes to migrate away from the late night calendar, public feedback should be sought to determine whether there is a need for a once-per-month night court for the purpose of hearing minor offense arraignments and non-evidentiary matters.

2. SECURITY

RECOMMENDATION 2-A: Add a panic button at the clerk's station in the courtroom and in the judges' chambers.

RECOMMENDATION 2-B: Either replace the courtroom audience seating or secure the existing seats so they cannot be used as weapons.

RECOMMENDATION 2-C: Require attorneys without court-issued picture identification to go through security screening before entering the courtroom.

RECOMMENDATION 2-D: The radio frequency used by the bailiffs should be one that is compatible with the Lee's Summit Police Department so the police officer providing extra security on the days the court is in session is able to monitor communications.

3. FACILITIES

RECOMMENDATION 3: Improve signage at the clerk's office and courtroom; avoid the use of paper signage.

4. PROBATION ISSUES

RECOMMENDATION 4-A: Purchase and install the probation-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system.

RECOMMENDATION 4-B: Generate a report from the new probation automated system indicating which defendants are on probation, for what offense, the duration of probation and the original citing agency (for example, Lee's Summit Police Department, code enforcement, animal control, etc.), and share this report with the appropriate departments.

5. LAW ENFORCEMENT ISSUES

RECOMMENDATION 5-A: Modify the police officer court appearance schedule to require attendance in court only when there is a subpoena for a contested hearing.

RECOMMENDATION 5-B: Modify the police data system to better track evidence in storage in order to facilitate timely disposition.

6. PROSECUTION ISSUES

RECOMMENDATION 6-A: Purchase and install the prosecution-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system. Until this occurs, the prosecutor's office should make use of InCode functionality currently available to them.

RECOMMENDATION 6-B: After installation of InCode for the prosecutor's office, give the prosecutor online access in the courtroom and to the state's ALERT system to enable them to inquire and track existing and prior cases.

RECOMMENDATION 6-C: With the time saved by using InCode, provide advocacy services to victims.

RECOMMENDATION 6-D: Relieve the prosecutor of the responsibility for writing citations for animal control or code enforcement violations.

7. FINANCIAL ISSUES

RECOMMENDATION 7-A: Create an accounts receivable unit in the City Attorney's Office to enforce compliance with delinquent accounts. This unit could handle other city department delinquent accounts as well.

RECOMMENDATION 7-B: Authorize an accounts payable fee to be imposed when defendants are unable to satisfy fine sanctions immediately and accounts receivable (and especially installment payments) are required to be established.

RECOMMENDATION 7-C: Traffic and minor offense fines are low and should be raised to be in closer alignment with neighboring jurisdictions and to serve as a deterrent.

8. REPORTING RELATIONSHIPS

RECOMMENDATION 8-A: *The city Finance Director should have direct oversight as to court revenue collection, distribution, safeguarding and accounting checks and balances, but not supervisory control over the court administrator.*

RECOMMENDATION 8-B: *The bailiffs and probation staff should report directly to the Court Administrator.*

RECOMMENDATION 8-C: *Include a public defender representative in the regular meetings of court stakeholders.*

9. OTHER CITY DEPARTMENTS

RECOMMENDATION 9: *Allow city Code Enforcement and Animal Control officials to write citations, file them electronically with the court, and have read-only access to the court's automated case processing system.*

10. TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

RECOMMENDATION 10-A: *Invite InCode experts to give consultation as to how to maximize the use of the court's automated case management system.*

RECOMMENDATION 10-B: *Allow the Lee's Summit Police Department limited authority to build and maintain police officer schedules in InCode, so the court can use the schedules when calendaring cases that require an officer's presence in court.*

RECOMMENDATION 10-C: *Write customized Crystal reports in InCode and save the templates so the court can regularly run routine inquiries.*

RECOMMENDATION 10-D: *Review the court's website for clarity and usefulness. See specific recommendations in Appendix C.*

11. THE FUTURE

RECOMMENDATION 11-A: *Establish a neighborhood dispute resolution program utilizing mediation to resolve criminal and quasi-criminal matters.*

RECOMMENDATION 11-B: *Migrate the clerk's office handling of case files into electronic media to the furthest extent possible.*

Appendix B – Risk versus Benefit and Responsibility Matrix

This matrix lists each recommendation, our take on the benefit-versus-risk and an indication of which parties are affected. We encourage the use of this matrix by the court and the city as a tool to decide which recommendations are worth the effort to implement and in which order they should be addressed; the court and the city should make their own assessments of risk versus return and use our assessments as advisory. When we refer to risk we mean the degree of difficulty, not the cost associated with implementation; the comments section explains our ratings.

| 1. Courtroom Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 1-A: A flat screen television monitor should be installed on the wall behind the witness box and the image of defendants being arraigned or otherwise heard remotely by videoconference should be shown on the screen to enable audience members open access to these court proceedings. | H | L | X | | | | | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The public's right to see open court proceedings is a high priority and the installation is not difficult.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 1-B: Install a multi-directional microphone so that parties in front of the bench may be heard by the audience; a mute switch for this microphone should be accessible by the judge. | H | L | X | | | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: The public's right to hear what is said in open court proceedings is a high priority and the installation is not difficult.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 1-C: Install a short, half-moon shaped shelf at the foot of the bench to provide a more secure distance between parties and the bench, and to provide a convenient resting place for paperwork. | H | L | X | | | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: The security benefits are high and the convenience is moderate.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 1. Courtroom Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|--|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 1-D: At the time the court makes final calendar changes to migrate away from the late night calendar, public feedback should be sought to determine whether there is a need for a once-per-month night court for the purpose of hearing minor offense arraignments and non-evidentiary matters. | H | M | X | X | X | X | X | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: The convenience and accessibility of night court to the public is high, but gathering enough feedback to determine whether it is needed is more difficult.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 2. Security Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 2-A: Add a panic button at the clerk's station in the courtroom and in the judges' chambers. | H | L | X | | X | | X | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Most security recommendations are high benefit by their nature, and this one is not difficult to implement.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 2-B: Either replace the courtroom audience seating or secure the existing seats so they cannot be used as weapons. | H | H | X | | X | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Most security recommendations are high benefit by their nature, but this one will be difficult to implement.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 2-C: Require attorneys without court-issued picture identification to go through security screening before entering the courtroom. | M | L | X | | X | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: This particular security recommendation involves attorneys who are not likely threats, but the difficulty to implement is low.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 2. Security Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 2-D: The radio frequency used by the bailiffs should be one that is compatible with the Lee's Summit Police Department so the police officer providing extra security on the days the court is in session is able to monitor communications. | H | L | X | | X | | X | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Most security recommendations are high benefit by their nature, and this one is not difficult to implement.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 3. Facilities Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 3: Improve signage at the clerk's office and courtroom; avoid the use of paper signage. | H | M | X | | | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Uniform signage is a benefit to the public and paper signage is not professional. However, making the transition and consistently enforcing it is not easy.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 4. Probation Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 4-A: Purchase and install the probation-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system. | H | M | X | X | | | | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefit of improved case processing technology is high, while the learning curve, implementation and integration of new software are relatively difficult. What mitigates this difficulty is the good reputation of the court's case processing software provider and the availability of a probation module from the same company.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 4. Probation Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 4-B: Generate a report from the new probation automated system indicating which defendants are on probation, for what offense, the duration of probation and the original citing agency (for example, Lee's Summit Police Department, code enforcement, animal control, etc.), and share this report with the appropriate departments. | H | M | X | X | | | X | | X | X |
| <i>COMMENT: While the value of such a report is high, the relative ease of producing it is unknown.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 5. Lee's Summit Police Department Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|--|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 5-A: Modify the police officer court appearance schedule to require attendance in court only when there is a subpoena for a contested hearing. | H | L | X | | | X | X | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefits from reduced police overtime and increased police availability for non-court duties are high. Implementation should not be difficult because the data support to schedule officer availability when they are needed is built into the court's automated case management software (see Recommendation 10-B).</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 5-B: Modify the police data system to better track evidence in storage in order to facilitate timely disposition. | H | L | X | | | X | X | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefits from timely disposition of criminal evidence are high, while the difficulty in implementing this recommendation is relatively low because the data exchange protocols largely exist today.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 6. Prosecution Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 6-A: Purchase and install the prosecution-specific module for the court's InCode automated case management system. Until this occurs, the prosecutor's office should make use of InCode functionality currently available to them. | H | M | X | | | X | | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefit of improved case processing technology is high, while the learning curve, implementation and integration of new software are relatively difficult. What mitigates this difficulty is the good reputation of the court's case processing software provider and the availability of a prosecution module from the same company.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 6-B: After installation of InCode for the prosecutor's office, give the prosecutor online access in the courtroom and to the state's ALERT system to enable them to inquire and track existing and prior cases. | H | L | | | | X | | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: Having accurate information about a defendant's background is very important, and the difficulty in establishing access to these systems is relatively low.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 6-C: With the time saved by using InCode, provide advocacy services to victims. | H | L | | | | X | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Providing support services to victims is important and the prosecutor has expressed a desire to do so. The improved staff productivity derived from the previous recommendation should enable the prosecutor to redeploy existing staff for this purpose.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 6-D: Relieve the prosecutor of the responsibility for writing citations for animal control or code enforcement violations. | H | L | | | | X | | | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefit of time gained on the part of the prosecutor and control gained by the city departments is high. The effort to provide city departments with citation books and training is relatively low.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 7. Financial Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|--|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 7-A: Create an accounts receivable unit in the City Attorney's Office to enforce compliance with delinquent accounts. This unit could handle other city department delinquent accounts as well. | H | M | X | | | | | X | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: The added revenue from such a program is much needed in today's fiscal climate. Establishing procedures and acquiring software to implement the program would be moderately difficult to achieve.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 7-B: Authorize an accounts payable fee to be imposed when defendants are unable to satisfy fine sanctions immediately and accounts receivable (and especially installment payments) are required to be established. | H | M | X | | | | | X | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Implementing an accounts receivable fee would generate much needed additional revenue and encourage prompt payment of fines. Doing so may be moderately difficult considering the city's reluctance to raise user fees. Review the enabling statute to determine whether that revenue derived from this fee would be state or local.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 7-C: Traffic and minor offense fines are low and should be raised to be in closer alignment with neighboring jurisdictions and to serve as a deterrent. | H | M | X | | | | | X | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Raising traffic and minor offense fines would serve as an important deterrent, while generating much-needed additional revenue. Doing so may be moderately difficult considering the city's reluctance to raise user fees.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 8. Reporting Relationship Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 8-A: The city Finance Director should have direct oversight as to court revenue collection, distribution, safeguarding and accounting checks and balances, but not supervisory control over the court administrator. | H | M | X | | | | | X | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: Establishing clear lines of authority is important, but making these changes will require a change in the City Charter.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 8-B: The bailiffs and probation staff should report directly to the Court Administrator. | H | L | X | X | X | | | | | |
| <i>COMMENT: Establishing clear lines of authority is important and implementing this recommendation will not require rule changes.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 8-C: Include a public defender representative in the regular meetings of court stakeholders. | H | L | X | | | | | | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: Including this important justice stakeholder in ongoing dialogue is important and doing so is not a difficult task.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 9. Other City Department Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|---|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 9: Allow city Code Enforcement and Animal Control officials to write citations, file them electronically with the court, and have read-only access to the court's automated case processing system. | H | L | X | | | X | | | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefits from improved prosecutor productivity and enhanced accountability are high, and the operational and data protocols for doing so are already established in the Lee's Summit Police Department.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 10. Technology Recommendations | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|--|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 10-A: Invite InCode experts to give consultation as to how to maximize the use of the court's automated case management system. | H | L | X | | | | | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: The benefit to the court is improved productivity, and the difficulty in doing so is low because the InCode provider would be motivated to provide these services in exchange for a showcase demonstration site.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 10-B: Allow the Lee's Summit Police Department limited authority to build and maintain police officer schedules in InCode, so the court can use the schedules when calendaring cases that require an officer's presence in court. | H | L | X | | | X | X | | X | |
| <i>COMMENT: Using these built-in features in the InCode software will improve productivity, and it is likely that the police department will be motivated to keep the officer's schedules current in order to cut down on overtime and scheduling conflicts.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 10-C: Write customized Crystal reports in InCode and save the templates so the court can regularly run routine inquiries. | H | M | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X |
| <i>COMMENT: Improved management information translates into improved operations. Our only hesitation as to difficulty in implementation is our lack of awareness as to the local availability of Crystal report writing capacity.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 10-D: Make | H | M | X | X | | X | X | X | X | X |
| <i>COMMENT:</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

| 11. Recommendations about the Future | Benefit | Risk | Court Admin | Probation | Bailiffs | Prosecutor | Police | Finance | IT Dept | Other City |
|--|---------|------|-------------|-----------|----------|------------|--------|---------|---------|------------|
| RECOMMENDATION 11-A: Establish a neighborhood dispute resolution program utilizing mediation to resolve criminal and quasi-criminal matters. | H | H | X | X | | X | X | | | X |
| <i>COMMENT: Effectively resolving disputes is the main mission of the court, but the ease of implementing this recommendation is dependent upon the availability of existing community resources that could be redirected to this purpose as opposed to the creation of these services.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| RECOMMENDATION 11-B: Migrate the clerk's office handling of case files into electronic media to the furthest extent possible. | H | M | X | X | | X | X | | X | X |
| <i>COMMENT: There are several tangible benefits derived from electronic versus paper processing of court files. The difficulty of implementing this recommendation is dependent upon the ability to integrate an effective document management solution in the court's automated case management software.</i> | | | | | | | | | | |

Appendix C – Suggestions for improving the court's website

The most important thing about a website is that it should be useful to its intended audience. Those of us who routinely access and critique websites can make a good case for what should be front and center and how it should be presented, but the staff who deal with the public on a constant basis are the ones who know what questions are frequently asked and what data is commonly sought. Staff should be asked what questions could be answered on the website. It may make sense to keep track for several weeks of the kinds of questions that are received at the counter or on the phone.

That said, there are certainly standard approaches for making your website useful.

Consider your customer. What does your usual user need on your website? Put those things foremost and present them in a way that is understandable and useful to the public. For example, most of your customers may be logging on to pay traffic violations. On this site, that link is very obvious on the main page. But below that is the court's mission, vision and goals. Few (if any) readers are interested in these items – they want to get to something useful. Put the mission, etc. in its own page so anyone who is interested can look at it.

Below the mission statement is a weekly calendar, generally using acronyms and abbreviations meaningful only to attorneys and other savvy court users. If they are the audience, fine, but don't make them scroll all the way to the bottom to find the calendar.

On the right side of the page is a list of "Resources," in other words a menu to other pages on the site. They are in alphabetical order, which is not meaningful when almost every category could start with the word "court." They should be ordered by priority, as in which pages are most needed by the website user. Judges' biographies, while interesting, will probably fall to the bottom.

Be consistent. After looking at a few pages the customer will get a sense of how your site is organized and how navigation works. When there are inconsistencies what started as a smooth process is pulled up short. For example, should each link open a new page? On this site, even the two links to the traffic payment page are different – the large link on the home page opens a new page, the link in the Resources column does not. And when "Attorney Entry Card" is selected, the menu on the right becomes the city's menu instead. This does not happen when any other Resource is selected.

Write in plain language and dispense with irrelevancies. The court's dress code has a lot of words about why it's important to dress appropriately. Make that section very brief, then list clearly what is not allowed. The page about court procedures is a good model. Court security should also be made more clear to the user.

The Schedule of Fees has only one Municipal Court fee and it's the very last item on the document, which is six pages long. That fee could instead be added to the Violations Bureau Fines and Fees.

Review all text for consistency in grammar, spelling, punctuation and formatting. The mission statement and vision should be complete sentences and end with periods. The bulleted items under goals should have the same spacing between the lines.

In addition, there may be value in adding a Probation segment. If there are standard rules every probationer (or probationer's family) needs to know, or frequently asked questions (FAQs) that take staff time away from more important duties, these could be addressed on the website.