

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE COCHISE COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
WORK SESSION HELD ON
THURSDAY, APRIL 17, 2025**

A work session of the Cochise County Board of Supervisors was held on Thursday, April 17, 2025, at 1:00 p.m. in the Board of Supervisors' Hearing Room, 1415 Melody Lane, Building G, Bisbee, Arizona.

Present: Frank Antenori, Chairman; Tom Crosby, Vice-Chairman; Kathleen L. Gomez, Supervisor

Staff Present: Sharon Gilman, Interim County Administrator
Joe Casey, Interim Deputy County Administrator
Lara Loewenheim, Clerk of the Board

Attendees: David Thorn, Presiding Judge
Niltza Flores, Court Administrator
Amy Hunley, Clerk of the Court
Janus Poppe, Justice of the Peace, Precinct 1
Rachel Gray, Deputy Clerk of the Court
Xavier Rios, Chief Juvenile Probation
Sarah Hembree, Chief Deputy Adult Probation
Rita Shipley, Director of Superior Court Budget and Finance
Stacy Fenhaus, Budget Manager

Chairman Antenori called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m.

ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Board of Supervisors

1. Budget Work Session - Discussion of County Budget for Fiscal Year 2025-2026 specifically: Court Administration, Justice of the Peace, Superior Court, Adult Probation, Juvenile Detention, and the Clerk of the Superior Court's Office.

David Thorn, Presiding Judge of the Superior Court, presented this item using a PowerPoint presentation. Judge Thorn discussed the justice system's goals and responded to questions from a previous Board work session. He explained that while counties aren't required to provide a minimum funding level for courts, legal standards still guide staffing needs. He highlighted that local probation officers are underpaid compared to state averages and described efforts to secure outside funding, including federal grants and forensic technology. Judge Thorn emphasized the importance of judicial independence and the legal requirement for mutual cooperation during the budget process between the courts and the Board of Supervisors.

Judge Thorn explained that while online access to court documents is ideal, limited funding requires prioritizing staff retention and competitive pay over technology upgrades. He shared that rural courts face unique staffing and compensation challenges, echoing findings from state leadership about underpaid judicial employees.

He stated a major budget request this year is funding a judicial call center to address widespread complaints about unanswered court phone calls and improve public access to court information.

Judge Thorn introduced another funding request for a customer service upgrade called Nemo Q, a ticketing system designed to streamline in-person visits to the clerk's office. He stated the proposed system would allow for scheduled appointments and estimated wait times for walk-ins, improving efficiency and transparency. He stated this initiative pairs with upcoming electronic calendar installations in the Superior Court, aiming to modernize outdated processes that have been in place for decades.

Judge Thorn shared plans to enhance the court's self-help center to better support individuals navigating the legal system. He stated updates have already been made to the website, aiming to simplify access to information and improve user experience, and the site now directs users to helpful how-to videos on topics like courtroom behavior, starting a child support case, or filing for divorce.

Judge Thorn emphasized the importance of professionalism and leadership in delivering fair access to justice. Judge Thorn requested to fund a deputy court administrator to support current operations and assist with succession planning. He stated Clerk and probation staff salaries are highlighted as a challenge, with compensation often falling below competitive levels, making recruitment and retention difficult. He requested additional staffing support for justice courts impacted by increased workloads from recent state law changes, without corresponding funding from the legislature.

Judge Thorn highlighted ongoing innovation efforts to comply with Arizona Supreme Court Administrative Order 2021-142, including the rollout of a digital evidence portal. He stated the system lets litigants submit and access digital exhibits like photos, videos, or texts through a secure, court-approved platform. He stated Superior courtrooms in Bisbee have already been upgraded, and plans are underway to expand to Sierra Vista and justice courts over the next five years.

In response to Vice Chairman Crosby, Judge Poppe clarified that all but one location operates under a collocated model. Ms. Flores stated the justice of the peace also serves as the municipal court judge under a separate contract with the city; The county maintains an intergovernmental agreement (IGA) with the cities, while the individual judge has a separate contract with the municipality.

In response to the Board, Judge Thorn highlighted the limitations of a justice of the peace in handling cases that fall under the jurisdiction of superior court judges, such as felony cases. He stated a justice of the peace can set a preliminary hearing for felony cases but cannot handle the full case, as they are not licensed attorneys. The board also discussed the qualifications needed to become a justice of the peace, which include being at least 18 years old, a U.S. citizen, able to read and write English, and living in the precinct they serve. Justices of the peace are required to undergo training, which includes two weeks of schooling and ongoing education to maintain certification.

Chairman Antenori emphasized the county's financial constraints, noting that revenue remains flat and there's been no population or economic growth. He stated the departments are requesting budget increases ranging from 2% to 8%, but the county lacks the funds to support them. He pointed out that the state has added more requirements while reducing funding. Chairman Antenori stated the Court fines and fees, with clarification that most fines collected don't stay within the county. Judge

Thorn stated while some court costs do return locally, they're set by statute and recently increased by about 17%. Chairman Antenori stated the point was made that service fees should reflect the actual cost of providing that service, ensuring taxpayers aren't subsidizing individual use.

Judge Thorn shared plans to streamline operations by expanding digital tools like a call center, electronic forms, and a more informative website. He stated the goal is to reduce reliance on multiple full-time clerks by automating routine tasks. Chairman Antenori noted that automation reducing labor costs aligns with effective budgeting.

Ms. Flores explained that the call center staff will help guide individuals through processes by phone, email, or mail. She stated residents can also be directed to nearby self-help centers, including one at the Douglas Library. She stated the goal is to ensure callers receive dedicated support without being rushed due to in-person traffic and this approach aims to improve service and accessibility across the county.

Ms. Hembree explained that the county remains financially responsible for medical care if a detained youth requires treatment, even after being transferred to the Pinal detention center. Ms. Shipley added that the move from Santa Cruz to Pinal County was made due to better financial terms and improved services, including 24/7 nursing. She noted while some of the allocated budget remains unused, it was held as a precaution during the transition because the prior facility lacked on-site medical staff, resulting in frequent off-site visits for basic care.

Ms. Fenhaus explained that rental increases have occurred gradually over the past year. She stated the budget line, covering operating leases and rentals, now includes many subscription-based IT agreements. Ms. Shipley noted that most of the court-related expenses are largely tied to the Arizona Court Automation Project. She stated the program supplies the courts with computer hardware, software, and network services, and it also maintains the network that supports court operations.

In response to the Board, Ms. Shipley stated the courts maintain a fleet that includes pool vehicles and probation transport units, with additional vehicles supplied by the state for intensive probation officers. She stated that vehicle allocation by the state is based on a caseload formula, not population.

In response to the Board, Ms. Shipley explained that while the state sets most filing fees, the county does receive a portion back. She stated that at the end of each month, a deposit sheet outlines what goes to the state and what is retained locally and some of the money sent to the state is redistributed to counties through grant programs like the criminal justice enforcement fund. She stated the funds are allocated based on county needs and help support areas such as probation services.

Ms. Shipley noted that the county anticipates an increase in costs for the IGA with Pinal County, which is up for renewal next January. The Board suggested that any cost savings, such as those from a successful call center initiative, could be retained and reinvested in improvements without requiring further approval. Ms. Gilman emphasized the need to balance fiscal responsibility with maintaining essential services, particularly in the face of limited resources and high tax burdens for the county's residents.

Judge Thorn highlighted that the proposal aims to provide essential services while transitioning to fewer "touch labor" tasks. He stated if it's successful, the call center will improve efficiency by answering phones and providing accurate information.

Chairman Antenori adjourned the meeting at 2:52 p.m.

APPROVED:

Frank Antenori, Chairman

ATTEST:

Lara Loewenheim, Clerk of the Board