



Local News

Midland County court fines/costs/restitution collections more than double this year

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for the Daily News

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A better tracking system and more aggressive approach are reaping big rewards for Midland County's collection of circuit court fines, costs and restitution from lawbreakers.

County Clerk Ann Manary and Trial Court Administrator Jerome M.P. Kole reported the average yearly revenue from collections hovered around \$150,000 in 2007, the year before the new collection program began. So far this year, \$445,000 has been collected. Although the new effort got under way in April 2008, it didn't get into full swing until January 2009, Manary said after she and Kole presented the news to the Midland County Board of Commissioners Tuesday.

"We did a little bit but we didn't have everybody on board to start the big push," she said.

The county handles 700 cases on payment plans, with a total of 558 defendants. Half of the money goes to crime victims as restitution, and the rest goes to the county and to the state.

The new computerized system does a better job of tracking defendants and their bills than the older program did, Manary said. Defendants receive first and, if necessary, second letters indicating the amounts they owe and offering payment plans. Failure to respond results in a show cause hearing and, if the person still doesn't communicate, the judge will issue a bench warrant, Kole said.

Circuit Judge Jonathan Lauderbach said he doesn't believe crime necessarily will be deterred because he and fellow Circuit Judge Michael Beale are taking a tougher stance about paying fines and restitution. But people who owe money will know that these two judges enforce the rules, he said.

"The word on the street ... is that these judges make you pay," he said. Commissioner Otis Wilson asked if the county tries to collect money after a person dies. Lauderbach said he doesn't know if such a situation has existed, and said most of the people who owe money don't have estates.

But the county would be allowed to collect from estates. Manary said her office has located everyone slated to receive a restitution check.

"Businesses close, people move ... you're trying to determine what happened to them," she said. "You just follow a little thread and sometimes you can follow it down the line and figure out where they went."

The work is laborious and means many more phone calls that come to her office, Manary said, but she believes it's worth the effort. Last year, she asked for a part-time staffer to help with the work load in 2009 but was unsuccessful.

"The work flow's there, that's not debatable at this point," she said. By next year, the county probably will have procedures in place to withhold money from defendants' taxes, Manary said.