

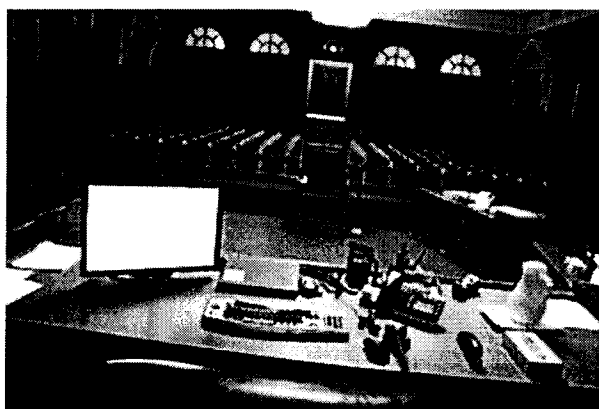
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## Virginia court system goes digital



Chase Purdy/Staff

**JUDGE'S EYE VIEW:** Augusta County Judge Victor V. Ludwig uses a computer in the courtroom as part of Virginia's push for a paperless judicial system.

By [Chase Purdy](#)

Published: June 6, 2010

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STAUNTON — Judge Victor V. Ludwig can only imagine what the judges of yesteryear think when they stare down from their portraits in the Augusta County Circuit Courtroom.

“A lot of these guys are saying, ‘What are you doing down there?’ ” Ludwig said, peering into a screen. “None of these other guys ever heard of a computer.”

When he ascended to the circuit court bench in 2008, Ludwig brought with him a computer; a tool he said keeps his courtroom running smoothly. With it he can schedule hearings, instant message clerks, research the law, type notes, store court forms and stay one step ahead of arguing attorneys.

The push for a more computerized court system escalated sharply in 2005 when the chief justice of the Virginia Supreme Court appointed Karl R. Hade as executive secretary.

With a tech-savvy, business background, Hade implemented a unified computer network for courts across the state. With Hade's mindset, and participants like Ludwig, the push for paperless courts saves Virginians hundreds of thousands of dollars a year.

### **Saving time and money**

When voters elected John B. Davis as Augusta County Circuit Court Clerk in 1983, employees still used typewriters for day-to-day operations, he said.

"We did everything by hand," Davis said. "We even had an adding machine."

Today the office uses the same size staff to perform quadruple the work for a county population that increased by almost 30,000 people, he said. Money saved by technological advances allow Augusta County clerks to stay in their original court building.

After 28 years as clerk, Davis said the job remains the same. The tools differ.

"What a clerk's office does is process information," he said. "We would not be able to function the way we used to, with the limited staff we have, without technology."

They manage land deeds, marriage records, criminal charges, court dockets, civil lawsuits and more. A walk through the court building today shows clerks busy behind monitors instead of stacks of oversized records books.

In fact, those massive books, specifically the deeds, live simultaneously in the vast informational network Hade helped create. Each record in each book has been scanned and stored in the Virginia courts network.

"Things are changing constantly," Davis said. "I can sit here and call up a court case and look at every single paper in that case."

The system isn't flawless, though, Davis said. When thunderheads pour into the Shenandoah Valley, clerks can only hope against a power outage. In that situation, "We just have to shut down," he said.

"We have back-ups and firewalls," Davis said. "But I still worry about that."

To preserve newly logged records, the system backs itself up every night, Davis said. Files from 1981 to present get sent to a master computer in Richmond. Older records, dating back to 1745, travel electronically to a computer in Charlotte, N.C.

But even with digital files zipping across the state, clerks still find themselves in transition, shuffling records that law mandates remain in paper format.

"It was great to be a part of that transition," Davis said. "And I think the next guy will make just as much a transition. We will go paperless. That's coming."

### **Ahead of the curve**

Among the 50 states, Virginia sets a high standard for a uniform computerized system, Hade said.

“We have traditionally been viewed as a leader, and I think we still are,” he said.

When appointed, Hade marked the first non-attorney to hold the office of executive secretary. The appointment set the courts into a direction of modernization, he said.

While many other states use private vendors for their electronic needs, the majority of Virginia’s courts use the state’s program.

The single-vendor model makes for simple and efficient system changes, Hade said. Every general district and juvenile and domestic relations court in the state uses Hade’s model. Circuit courts are allowed to choose between their own vendor and the state, Hade said.

Of the 121 circuit courts in Virginia, only three use private vendors: Alexandria, Fairfax and Virginia Beach, he said. Those courts settled into their systems well before the state option.

At the forefront of new court technology, Norfolk Circuit Court Clerk George E. Schaefer III said his courthouse has revolutionized day-to-day operations.

“In about 2006 we decided to eliminate paper files,” Schaefer said. “The papers come into the courthouse and we immediately scan them into a digital format.”

The changes increased his office’s productivity by 12 percent and saved thousands of dollars.

In September, when courts faced budget cuts, Schaefer laid off nine employees.

“We didn’t skip a beat,” he said, crediting computers. “We’re doing the job with 18 percent less people. It’s very doable.”

Norfolk Circuit Court was the first to use Twitter and one of the first to experiment with Kindle e-book devices for legal briefs, Schaefer said.

In the first 15 months of his paperless program his court saved \$345,814 on criminal paper filings alone.

Schaefer said his push to modernize doesn’t reinvent the wheel because most people already use computers.

Fixed inside his court, Schaefer provides 12 terminals for people to browse and print documents.

The paperless push slowed somewhat, clerks said, when in 2006 the Virginia General Assembly re-examined portions of the Virginia Public Records Act and added language that requires courts to keep some paper documents for three years.

“Some people got nervous about it. They love paper,” Schaefer said.

But the old system was riskier, he said.

“We’re actually better than before,” he said. “We were more susceptible to an act of God. A flooding, a fire.”

Some of the biggest skeptics fell into the new system early on, Schaefer said, referring to presiding

judges in Norfolk. With help, they eventually came around, he said.

Touting a leader's mentality, Schaefer said all the changes his court makes can be applied to a court of any size.

"As I see it, if I can reduce it to an algorithm we're gonna do it," he said.

### **From the bench**

When Judge Ludwig steps into his courtroom each morning, his routine begins with the click of a mouse.

"The first thing I open up is this calendar," he said. "And it will set out for me anything I have to do on any given day."

Once organized, he pulls up the Internet, where he can access state law codes, historical research and case archives.

"The more I learn about it the better I am with it," Ludwig said. "When they come up with some new idea I want to know about it."

Ludwig is one of two area judges who use computers on the bench. Just across Johnson Street in downtown Staunton, Judge Charles L. Ricketts III also logs on.

Ricketts said he started working with computers as an alternative to his messy penmanship. Rather than scrawl items even he has trouble reading, Ricketts said he created electronic forms tailored to specific hearings. Many of his forms mirror the same documents Ludwig created. The two men swap ideas occasionally, finding new ways to effectively and efficiently run their courts, Ricketts said.

Ludwig said many judges still feel most comfortable with paper files, hardback books and staff to type for them.

"I think I was a little ahead of the curve with respect to computers," he said.

A look at his computer and keyboard reveal years of tinkering, organization and make-shift management.

Dozens of electronic folders contain even more forms, tailored to different hearings and proceedings. His space bar, capped with a slim line of weather proofing to silence his taps, showed ways in which Ludwig tailored his own operation.

"I remember [Judge] Humes Franklin the day I was sworn in on the court," he recalled, smiling. "He said something like, 'I know the torch has passed.'"

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