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Retiring judge will miss some of the work, all of the people

By Rob Ollikainen

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PORT ANGELES — Clallam County Superior Court Judge S. Brooke Taylor described his job as both “relentless” and the “ultimate honor.”

Last week, he told an assembly of friends and colleagues that his impending retirement will be “relentless fun.”

Taylor, 70, will lay down his gavel Dec. 31.

He will be remembered in part for becoming the first judge to fill a newly-created third seat on the Superior Court bench in 2008.

A lifelong Port Angeles resident and the son of a prominent attorney and judge, Taylor plans to remain rooted on the North Olympic Peninsula and travel after he retires.

“People ask me all the time: ‘What are you going to miss?’” Taylor said in a ceremony at the county commissioners’ meeting Tuesday.

“I’m going to miss some of the work. Not all of it. Not the 2 a.m. Saturday-morning search warrants — some [State Patrol] Trooper is out on the highway with a DUI arrest and needs to take a blood sample. That I won’t miss at all.

“But I will miss all of the people. We are blessed with an incredible staff.”

In particular, Taylor said he will miss presiding alongside his longtime friend and former law office coworker: Superior Court Judge George L. Wood.

“He has been the best mentor and colleague and friend that I could have asked for,” Taylor said.

“I do feel good about leaving the court in his capable hands.”

Taylor postponed his departure by one year “for the sake of continuity” after former Superior Court Judge Ken Williams stepped down at the end of 2012.

“It did not make any sense to me to have Judge Williams and myself retiring simultaneously and leaving the bench with two new judges,” said Taylor, who has three years left on his current term.

“Even though we had a very capable replacement for Judge Williams with Judge (Erik)

Rohrer, it is a steep learning curve.”

Gov. Jay Inslee on Dec. 5 appointed Clallam County hearings examiner and former chief deputy prosecuting attorney Chris Melly to fill the vacant seat.

Melly, 62, will take office Jan. 2 and has said he intends to run for the remaining two years of the term in November 2014.

Taylor said Melly is “well qualified” for the job. He added: “The amount of stuff that you have to know to do this job well is mind boggling.”

Looking back on a 44-year career in the justice system, Taylor said he was particularly proud of fulfilling a 2007 campaign promise to help alleviate a backlog of cases in Superior Court.

“When I took the bench in January of 2008, we were behind,” Taylor told the three commissioners.

“And justice delayed is justice denied. It’s a saying that has a great bit of truth to it. I was seeing criminal files (in 2008) that were labeled ’04, ’05, ’06.

“Once we added a third judge, in the next two years, I think the numbers will show that we have eliminated that,” Taylor said.

“That was my promise to the taxpayers and to this board, and I think we have achieved that.”

According to Wood, Taylor did more than just speed up the system.

He brought “a wealth of legal experience and a great passion for the rule of law,” Wood said.

“But probably most importantly, he brought a sense of dignity and respect to the courtroom and Superior Court.”

Wood said Taylor was always fair, curious, just and practical.

“I believe he’s been a model judge for the state of Washington, and I’d put him toe-to-toe against anybody on the trial court bench,” Wood said.

Taylor’s signature case as a judge was also one of his last.

He recently presided over the seven-week, double-murder retrial of Darold Stenson, a Sequim bird farmer twice convicted of killing his wife and business partner in 1993 and sentenced Dec. 10 to life in prison.

Taylor moved the high-profile trial to Kitsap County Superior Court to ensure an impartial jury.

In a Thursday interview, Taylor described the Stenson case as a “career trial for a trial judge.”

Taylor honed his skills practicing law in the historic Clallam County Courthouse.

His father, the late Stanley A. Taylor, practiced law for 55 years and served as a Port Angeles Municipal Court judge before the city court was folded into Clallam County District Court.

Stanley Taylor was a founding board member of the Olympic Peninsula YMCA and became its first board president in 1948.

Brooke Taylor served on the same board in the 1990s and started the YMCA’s golf tournament with Dana Shaltry.

Like Williams, Taylor has offered to “pinch hit” as a Superior Court judge in retirement.

Taylor thanked the county commissioners for funding the court despite some heated budget discussions in an era of state cuts.

“We’ve had our moments, but I can say this: at the end of the day this board has always provided us with what we need, and we appreciate that,” Taylor said.

“You’d hate to think there’s a financial side of justice but obviously there is.”

Taylor said Washington ranks last among the 50 states in terms of funding its felony justice system.

“That is a burden that you gentlemen have to deal with,” Taylor told commissioners.

“This is going to be an ongoing lobbying effort on all our parts to see if we can change that.”

Commissioner Mike Doherty, who attended Port Angeles High School with Taylor, said his longtime friend and former high school football captain had the credentials to practice law anywhere in the country.

“I think the entire Class of ’61 is proud of Brooke,” Doherty said.

“A lot of us watched his career over the years, and we’re proud that he came back home.”

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