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## Editorial: County takes right approach on new judges

The Spokane County commissioners are taking a page, actually 14 pages, out of the Washington governor's playbook for making judicial appointments.

They will also rely on a local bar association panel to screen applicants for the District Court vacancy created when Judge Richard White retired last week.

Both steps are encouraging – if they follow through. The last time the commissioners made a District Court selection, in 2005, they picked their own screening panel, then bypassed the panel's five recommended candidates. The choice was political, and then-Commissioner Phil Harris made no bones about it.

Voters dumped the crony in the next election.

This go-round, by requiring all candidates fill out the Washington State Governor's Office Uniform Judicial Evaluation Questionnaire, the commissioners have hung a sign on the District Court vacancy: "Only serious candidates need apply."

The form goes way beyond the typical recitations of education and work history. Applicants are asked to summarize their most significant cases, actions to increase court access for the poor and minorities, and – in less than 50 words – their judicial philosophy. If in practice more than 15 years, they must produce the names and telephone numbers of 10 opposing attorneys, plus 10 other colleagues familiar with their skills and qualifications.

Not many professionals in any field would voluntarily submit to so thorough a disrobing.

"You bare your soul when you fill that thing out," says Matt Andersen, who chairs the Spokane County Bar Association's Judicial Evaluation Committee.

The committee will select the 11-member panel that will review the forms, examine writing samples and interview candidates. To help make the interviews as impartial as possible, the same member asks the same question of every candidate.

Members, including judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys and law professors, will not be picked until the application window closes Aug. 1. The panel has six weeks to

forward its assessments: exceptionally well-qualified, well-qualified, qualified, or not qualified. There is a “refused to participate” option, as well.

The panel does not make a recommendation, nor does it rank the candidates. The commissioners do not want bar members polled, so no poll will be conducted.

Andersen says governors Christine Gregoire and Gary Locke used the questionnaire in evaluating every candidate for Superior Court and Court of Appeal vacancies. King and Pierce counties also use it.

Spokane County’s commissioners will do themselves and the third branch of government substantial good if they set aside politics to assure the best-qualified, not best-connected, judges are on the bench.

The public will be able to read the filled-out questionnaires online, and render their own judgment.