

Editorial: Kittitas County to get a new judge

Kittitas County residents knew this would be Kittitas County Superior Court Judge Michael Cooper's final term in office. The surprise is that Cooper has decided to not finish his term and instead will retire this fall.

There is not much turnover on the bench in Kittitas County. Cooper has served more than 22 years. The key point in his decision to retire is it creates the opportunity for Gov. Chris Gregoire to appoint his replacement. That replacement will have the inside edge when the position goes onto the ballot in November 2012.

Cooper's final day is slated as Oct. 1 but he will likely be behind the bench for a time after, completing unfinished cases and possibly handling new cases until a new judge can be appointed.

People apply to be appointed. The governor selects from that applicant pool. Applicants must be qualified members of the Washington State Bar Association. The deadline to apply is Oct. 17.

Judges have always been an odd fit in the election process. Candidates cannot campaign promising to rule one way or another on any issue or crime. Traditionally these have been pretty conservative, low-key races. It's only been in recent years that some judicial races in larger cities have become hotly contested political-style races.

Voters basically need to get a feel for a candidate's values and deportment. Does a person have the legal knowledge and temperament required to be a judge? Judges tend to be people fairly well known within the legal profession in the community. Residents need to be comfortable with the person making potentially life-changing decisions.

The names of applicants have not been released yet, but there are indications that a few, if not several, local attorneys have applied. Gregoire won't be lacking in candidates. As part of the process the candidates receive a judicial evaluations rating.

Little influence

At this point, county residents don't have any influence in the decision-making process. The best-case scenario for residents is that the decision is not influenced by partisan politics.

Judgeships are non-partisan positions and hopefully whether an applicant is a Democrat or Republican is not a consideration in Gregoire's evaluation.

It is a fact that incumbents have an advantage in a judicial race, but in this case hopefully the unsuccessful applicants decide to seek the seat when it is up for election in 2012. It would be a shame if the appointment pre-empts voters' ability to review and evaluate a wide selection of people for this critical position.

Whatever happens, Kittitas County will experience change. Cooper has served the county well in his 22 years as Kittitas County Superior Court judge. We wish him the best in whatever he decides to do next in his life.