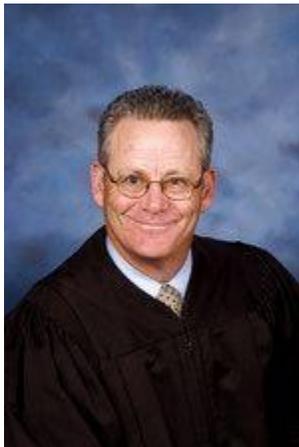


In Bremerton, How Visible Should a Judge Be in the Community?

By Josh Farley (Contact)
Saturday, October 24, 2009



Ed Wolfe



James Docter

BREMERTON

How a judge handles himself off the bench has become a key point of contention in the race for Bremerton Municipal Court judge.

Bremerton attorney-turned-candidate Ed Wolfe, 62, sees wearing the robe in the community, away from the court, as a way to help prevent crime — particularly among the city's youth — and keep the court in the public eye.

If elected, "People will know about this court, even if they don't come before this court," he said.

For incumbent Judge James Docter, 54, managing a bulging caseload and excelling within the judiciary takes priority. He's also concerned that knowing too many people in a community can make it more difficult for a judge to be impartial.

"I don't think the public wants the judge outside the courtroom," Docter said. "Where a judge can contribute is in the judicial branch."

At stake is a \$135,000-a-year position overseeing the court, which handles the city's misdemeanor criminal cases, traffic infractions and parking tickets. The advent of [red light photo enforcement](#) and an increase in [proactive policing](#) has resulted in a ballooning caseload.

Docter, who's devoted his career to criminal law and now teaches fellow judges how to apply it, has served on the Bremerton bench since first winning election in 1997. In that time, he's added a probation officer to better ensure offenders comply with their sentences, expanded the use of jail alternatives — such as house arrest — and brought security to the courthouse.

Wolfe, by contrast, started his own law office a dozen years ago after working as a U.S. ambassador, a corporate attorney and a vice president of a Seattle seafood company. His downtown Bremerton practice has focused on administrative, business, civil, contract and personal injury law.

Wolfe said his family bought a home on Marine Drive in the late '90s. What started as a weekend home became their permanent residence.

"We fell in love with the people here," Wolfe said.

Docter is no stranger to Kitsap County; his grandfather bought a house on Bainbridge Island in 1916. His first job in the legal profession came at the Crawford firm in Port Orchard, handling public defense.

Living near Fort Ward State Park on Bainbridge — where he served as a city council member for a term — Docter commuted by boat to and from Port Orchard. He now lives on Rocky Point.

Wolfe currently serves as pro tem judge in Bremerton Municipal Court each Tuesday, handling a calendar of traffic infractions. He can also work as a pro tem judge in Kitsap County District Court and as an arbitrator in Kitsap County Superior Court.

"I think in these dire economic times, a fresh look is a good thing," said Wolfe, who is running for office for the first time. "I think the status quo is not good enough."

Docter was the first elected municipal court judge in Bremerton's history, following a law passed in the Legislature in 1993 that mandated that cities with a full-time judge must elect, rather than appoint, them.

Bremerton remains the only city in Kitsap where a municipal court election is held.

Docter said he ran the first time because he felt he could make a difference in keeping tabs on those who came through the court — and therefore improve overall public safety. He still believes he can do that.

In his first term, he successfully lobbied for a probation officer using a state grant and city money. Too many times defendants didn't

follow through with terms of their sentence, and the officer could go into the community to ensure compliance.

“Not only do you protect the public, but you improve the welfare of the offender, and you keep them from coming back (to court),” he said.

Technology has also spurred changes in the court during his time on the bench, Docter said. He created a new electronic home-monitoring program in which some DUI defendants are required to blow into a phone twice a day to prove they're sober.

For certain victims of no-contact order violations, Docter has also implemented a system where the offender must wear a GPS device. Probation officers can monitor them to ensure they're staying within perimeters drawn around the victim's home and work.

Docter also established courthouse security during his time on the bench.

Wolfe believes he could increase the court's efficiency. He said that he'd start by bringing in a consultant to look at “the whole court

operation” if elected.

“I know how to run a business,” Wolfe said. “And I know how to make it successful.”

He said traffic tickets could be contested by mail, cutting down on the court costs required when they are heard orally.

Docter said he already allows some tickets to go by mail, but that in some cases, a hearing in court can be faster and necessary. He cites a red light ticket, where a court date allows the parties can view the alleged infraction.

Docter said the court could be more efficient — with more staff. He said cases filed in his court have increased from 1,398 in 2004 to 2,368 in 2007, and the numbers continue to increase.

Wolfe, who frequently uses the phrase “People's Court,” said he'd like to see a night court session added for those who can't make it to court during the day.

Docter said that such a night session would cost too much, and that there's still people who are hesitant to come into downtown Bremerton during the evenings.

One thing the candidates do agree upon: moving the court from its rented location on the 900 block of Pacific Avenue to a new building as soon as possible. A plan was funded by a [bond approved by voters](#) in 2002, but the money went for city fire and police projects.

Sixty-three attorneys this year weighed in on the two candidates in [Kitsap County Bar Association poll](#). Forty-six of those attorneys said Docter was their first choice; Wolfe was the first choice of 13 lawyers; the rest abstained from voting.

James Docter, 54

Resides in: Rocky Point area

Current Job: Bremerton Municipal Court judge

Background: Has been Bremerton judge since 1998; worked previously as a public defender with Crawford firm in Port Orchard for nine years; did sales for an awning and solar heating business in Seattle for five years; worked in Peace Corps in Guatemala for two years.

Family: Lives with girlfriend Maria Elger, her daughter and three cats.

Civic Involvement: Kitsap County Law and Justice Council; Kitsap County Trial Court Coordinating Council, District and Municipal Court Judges' Association Board Member, Washington State Board for Court Education, Washington State Judicial College faculty member and dean.

War chest: \$33,026.65

Spent: \$20,626.69

Little-known fact: Docter went to grade school with Bill Gates

On the Web: www.judgedocter.com/

Ed Wolfe, 62

Resides in: Marine Drive area

Current Job: Lawyer, Wolfe Law Office, focusing on administrative, business, civil, contract and personal injury law.

Background: Served as ambassador in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations; worked as vice president for Seattle-based seafood company; worked as a corporate attorney at Seattle law firm. Founded Wolfe Law Offices in Bremerton 12 years ago.

Family: Married to Wendy Miles, has one college-aged son

Civic Involvement: Board member of Bremerton Boys and Girls Club, Kitsap County Historical Society, Olympic College Foundation. Member of Bremerton Rotary.

War chest: \$28,565.89

Spent: \$16,116.50

Little-known fact: Wolfe rented his Queen Anne home to former Mariner Jamie Moyer

On the Web: www.edwolfe4judge.com/

Read more: <http://www.kitsapsun.com/news/2009/oct/24/candidates-differ-on-judges-role-off-the-bench/#ixzz0V4CZX3Ge>