

Message from Judge Debra Lev

It has been my honor to serve this community as your elected judge for the past 20 years. After almost two decades of relative quiet at the Bellingham Municipal Court, in May of last year, several employees of the Court ceased work due to an unarticulated "safety" concern. Although employees repeatedly refused to identify any safety issue that could conceivably justify a work stoppage, the Court took the possibility of a safety risk seriously.

As your judge, it is my duty to follow the rule of law and long-standing constitutional principles, including the separation of powers doctrine which recognizes three co-equal independent branches of government. Under the law, the Court could not allow or participate in an Executive branch investigation of the Court. To do so, would be a violation of law and the Canons of Judicial Conduct. For these reasons, I was compelled to seek relief in the Whatcom County Superior Court which granted an injunction stopping this Executive interference into the Judicial branch. The Order prohibited the Executive branch from compelling the Court's participation in the Executive branch's investigation.

The Court and the Executive branch of the City have since resolved these matters amicably. As part of that settlement, the Executive branch recognizes the authority of the Presiding Judge, pursuant to law, over hiring, supervision, discipline, termination and other working conditions of the Court. I look forward to meetings with the Mayor and having all three separate branches of City government working collaboratively.

As a reflection of how seriously the Court took the matter, an external investigator was hired to perform an independent and comprehensive investigation of the employees' concerns. I believe the public has a right to know the full results of this seven-month investigation, particularly the conclusion that the employees' stated concerns provided no basis for their walk-out.

This independent investigation has reinforced that open, transparent, and honest communication is integral to productive working relationships. I want to assure you that the Bellingham Municipal Court has a strong and resilient team, and that we will continue to take all actions necessary to protect the safety of our Court and serve the community.

Respectfully,

