

Public Defender Matt Shirk in town on promotional tour

BY JAMES WILLIAMS

Monitor Editor

Matthew A. (Matt) Shirk, is Public Defender in Judicial District 4, said last Thursday that he repeatedly heard two comments during his 2008 campaign.

The first was, "You mean you have to run for that?"

His predecessor, Democrat Bill White had held the office for many years and rarely had a ballot opponent. District 4 includes Nassau, Duval and Clay Counties.

Shirk said the other comment he heard over and over was, "Oh, yeah, get those bad guys off the streets."

Shirk had to remind the voters that a public defender's constitutional duty is to try to keep indigent defendants out of jail, not put them there.

Riding the current wave of budget-cutting, anti-tax sentiment, Shirk, a Republican, ran his campaign on a promise to run a cheaper, more cost-effective department without jeopardizing defendants' right to competent, effective legal representation.

While election season was going on, White and Shirk saw the office's budget cut by almost 3 percent. In 2010, the State swept 11.2 percent from the due process fund. Coming into the office, Shirk said he would cut more.

Now, he has been traveling around the judicial district to stay in touch with voters. He especially wants the public to know he is keeping his cost-cutting promises.

Last week Shirk submitted his annual report, and highlighted the bullet points



Fourth Judicial District Public Defender Matt Shirk

of what he points to as successes.

As is required by Florida law, Shirk's-

office collected \$732,239 in costs from defendants in 2010, a 61.9 percent increase from the previous year.

Shirk said he had been diligent about telling defendants to pay for their own defense when it was clear they could afford it.

Shirk also turned to technology, installing a public defender jail video conferencing system upgrades for attorneys and detained clients. His current system costs less than half of the one previously used, he said. The system will save an estimated \$125,000 in the 4th Circuit.

A digital deposition system was also implemented to replace live, pre-trial court reporters. Shirk's office estimates this will save taxpayers nearly \$200,000 per year in per diem and printing costs.

Shirk expanded the public defender pro bono program, increasing to 30 the number of attorneys available for pro bono public defense cases.

Shirk also said he cut salaries in the public defender's office when he took over. He lost a few attorneys, but hired new ones at lower rates.

He said he had also hired Spanish-speaking attorneys, assistant public defenders and staff members to eliminate the need for translators.

Shirk imposed a 6 percent cut to vendors last February, with no interruption in the flow of work. Only a handful of vendors decided to drop

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With a laugh, Shirk said it was because he walked in the 2008 parade, which he did.

He said for that and other reasons he had handled carried Clay County and Keystone County precincts by relying on direct and personal contact with voters

Asked how it was he came to win the election against a long-time incumbent, especially since White had a more than \$200,000 war chest, while Shirk went into the campaign with only \$30,000.

Last Thursday, Shirk was Florida," Shirk said in a release. the communities in Northeast clients, the local taxpayers and staff has done on behalf of our pleased with the hard work our productive two years and I am "It has been a very busy and decision-making with a positive direction in aimed to provide young males issues and has created programs Mason handles juvenile justice advocate and Director Rob Nationally recognized reform Drug Court.

support for the Duval County of drug-related incidents, and reduction in recidivism rates on innocence, a significant continuing education seminars and successes like motivational Shirk points to other moves of 257 jury trials in 2010. Defendants won acquittals in 51 percent in 2010. Assistant Public from 12 percent in 2008 to 20 win-percentage at trial grew right to a fair trial. The office have not affected a defendant's Defender, the cuts and savings. According to the Public operating costs.

At the end of Fiscal Year 2010 the public defender's office has \$366,452 in surplus funding despite unforeseen budget cuts. Shirk said his administrator continued to reduce government waste in 2010 and had cut more than \$162,000 from discretionary operating costs.

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