

County judge: court attracts few fanatics

By Jane Owens

Very few "kooks" bring cases to the Lancaster County Small Claims Court, according to Judge Jeffrey Chevront.

"When the Small Claims Court was first started, some people were afraid that all kinds of fanatics would be coming to court," Chevront said. "Actually, that hasn't been true at all. I think the court is working out very well."

Created by a Nebraska legislative bill passed last January, the court provides a method for settling legal disputes involving claims of \$500 or less.

The bill, sponsored by the Senate Judiciary Committee, reorganized Nebraska's county court system, Chevront noted.

Since the Lancaster County Small Claims Court was established, Chevront said he has heard about 30 cases each month.

The court offers several advantages to persons who use it, he said.

People involved in minor legal disputes do not have to hire lawyers but still can have a judge decide their cases.

Another advantage is that Small Claims Court cases usually are settled quickly. Most are settled within four months, according to the judge.

Before the court was created, some small claims were difficult to settle because many lawyers do not take cases involving such small amounts of money, Chevront said.

About 70 per cent of the court's cases involve claims of less than \$200, the judge said.

Most of the cases Chevront hears involve automobile accident property damages, he said.

The judge said he also hears several legal disputes between landlords and tenants and a few cases involving dissatisfied consumers.

"One of the most interesting cases I've had involved a \$12 claim against the telephone company for long distance charges. The girl who filed the claim had one of the best prepared arguments I've ever heard, including those prepared by professional lawyers," Chevront said.

According to the judge, the girl brought several witnesses and affidavits to court.

"The phone company argued that their computer never makes a mistake," Chevront said. The girl won her case, "which just proves that you can beat big business."

Some persons who win cases are dissatisfied because they expect the court to collect claims for them, the judge said. Instead, they must collect their own claims.

The court can garnish a person's wages or execute his property if he refuses to pay a claim, Chevront noted.

In addition, either party can appeal the court's decision to the Lancaster County District Court within 10 days.

"I've been surprised by the very high percentage of small claims that have been paid," Chevront said.

"We've only had two appeals to go to the District Court, but I'm certain that it's not due to the wisdom of the small claims judge," he said. "It's just that the claims are so small it doesn't pay to appeal them."

Chevront's other duties include hearing probate and civil cases as a Lancaster County District Court judge, he said.

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