

Criminal cases on fast track

Strafford County Superior Court gaining efficiency

By **BRAD MORIN**
Democrat Staff Writer

DOVER — New courtroom procedures are moving criminal cases through Strafford County Superior Court at a faster pace.

"What we're trying to do here is 'same justice sooner,'" said David Bennett, a criminal justice consultant from Utah who was hired by the county as part of the \$20 million jail expansion project.

"When you look at a jail population you'll see, in most jails, the majority of defendants are awaiting trial," Bennett said. "The more efficient criminal justice system you have, the fewer jail beds we need."

At an informational meeting Tuesday on the jail project, Superior Court Judge Bruce Mohl said the measures have been in place since September. Judges are being more discriminating in the granting of continuances, which can sometimes postpone court action 35 days or more, he said.

Julie Howard, clerk of the Superior Court, said the staff is also working to schedule conferences and trial dates before the parties leave the courtroom.

There were 39 defendants indicted in August and 67 percent of those cases had been disposed of within 180 days. There were 51 people indicted in November and 92 percent of those cases had been disposed of within 180 days. These figures did not count defendants who had arrest warrants and could not be located.

But faster may not be better, according to Stuart Dedopoulos, a Durham attorney and former public defender. Dedopoulos said he is not in favor of some of the scheduling changes that have occurred and he has heard similar concerns from some of his colleagues.

"There's a legitimate concern about moving cases along," Dedopoulos said. "My concern is there is always a delicate balance. I

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think now it's tipping in favor of moving cases along too quickly."

"We're dealing with people and we're dealing with people's problems. Speed is not the overall concern."

Bennett says swift disposition of cases eases the burden on victims. Only about 14 percent of Strafford County criminal cases will go to trial, and he said most are resolved with pleas.

Stephen White, a Dover defense attorney and former Rochester city prosecutor, said he has noticed the change with his criminal cases, but he takes it as a positive sign that will ultimately lower the crime rate.

"In my mind...the sooner

the matter is resolved in relation to when the incident occurred, the better off we are," he said. "The quicker we move from arrest to sentencing, the better the criminal justice system is going to work."

"They'll see their friends getting busted on March 1 and going to jail July 3," White said. "You're in a real-time situation then."

Strafford County Attorney Janice Rundles said her office has been involved in efforts to make the court more efficient. She noted that grand jury sessions have been moved up to once a month instead of 10 times a year.

"I think Strafford County is very fast. Based on my expe-

rience, the cases seem to get set for trial much faster than elsewhere," Rundles said. "I think it's kind of a statewide effort to stop the backlog."

Bennett believes the key to efficiency is having the court control the docket, rather than the parties involved. White believes this trend began years ago under judges Temple and Nadeau.

"The court has become more involved in the docket, but we saw a trend in Strafford County, a real trend, many, many years ago," he said.

"I've said it for 15 years. If anyone wants to know how the criminal justice system should function, they should come to Strafford County."