

# Forum probes flaws in N.H. courts

## Judges' attitudes in family disputes, prison system cited

By Emily Aronson

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PORTSMOUTH — A less adversarial relationship between the courts and the public, especially when dealing with family issues, was called for Monday during a hearing on the state's court system.

The hearing was sponsored by the New Hampshire Citizens Commission on the State Courts, which is seeking feedback on how courts can better serve the public. The City Hall listening session was the fourth of 11 hearings scheduled across the state.

Out of the six people who spoke at the afternoon session, four were men who criticized how family courts handle divorce proceedings.

"Is it imaginable that we would design a system that causes so much animosity and pain, and costs so much?" Steven Vogl asked.

Vogl said the adversarial behavior of many judges, attorneys, and guardians ad-

litem only add to the stress of getting divorced. Vogl runs a mediation service in Exeter and said he spent 2½ years finalizing his own divorce.

Vogl said divorcing parties should be more involved in the legal process, rather than leaving much of the discussion to the attorneys and judges.

"Bring the judges off the bench — literally and figuratively," he said.

Stratham resident Jean Jackson agreed, saying: "I'm just wondering why things have to be done in back rooms?"

Jackson said she was also concerned that inefficiencies within the system lead to time and money being wasted.

"When I was at jury duty recently I was aware of how much time I just sat around," she said.

Michael Geanoulis, of New Castle, said he would like family court judges to learn more about fathers' roles in childhood development. Geanoulis, director of the

state chapter of the National Congress for Fathers & Children, said divorce rulings often separate fathers from their families.

Geanoulis also said judges should realize that many divorced fathers don't have the earning potential to provide the amount of child support mandated by the courts.

Mayor Evelyn Sirrell spoke of her son, Christopher, who is currently incarcerated at New Hampshire State Men's Prison. She said, "the system, as far as I'm concerned, is not working."

Sirrell wondered why "prisoners with impeccable records" are not being released early for good behavior as a way to deal with overcrowded prisons.

Commission co-chairwoman Katharine Euguess said the commission will continue to hold listening sessions and gather testimony, and expects to release its report with recommendations for improvement in spring 2006.