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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
April 1, 2008

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County clerk proposes pagers for jurors

Macomb County Clerk / Register of Deeds Carmella Sabaugh will present her plan to provide jurors with pagers similar to those given at some restaurants to a joint meeting of the Mount Clemens City Commission and Downtown Development Authority on Wednesday, April 2, 2008 at 7 pm at city hall where she will seek support and matching funds. Sabaugh proposed the plan in October and has been working on the details since with the hope of having a system in place this spring. Although the county may be the first in the Michigan to give pagers to jurors, the practice is common in the restaurant industry.

“Jurors are important people and should be treated well,” said Sabaugh. “Why not let our jurors wait outdoors, shop or enjoy the restaurants the city has to offer until they are needed?”

In 2007, the number of people who served on Macomb County jury duty was 19,262. Jurors would be eligible to use a pager if they have not yet been sent to a courtroom. As long as jurors remain within walking distance of the court, the paging system allows them to be promptly available for the judges. The pagers provide an out-of-range warning.

Most of a juror’s day is spent waiting. There are few televisions in the jury room. It can be crowded. At times it can be loud. Most jurors do not actually serve on a case. In 2007, of the 19,262 jurors who appeared for jury duty, only 1,724 actually served on a trial. Cases are often settled shortly before trial, including the day of trial. This sometimes leads to frustration by jurors who feel their time was not needed. In reality, the presence of jurors in the building often helps to motivate litigants to settle cases, even if jurors don’t actually serve on a trial.

With pagers, jurors would have the freedom to get something to eat, shop or take care of personal or work-related business in the downtown Mount Clemens area. They may be paged to return to the jury room at any moment, but would not necessarily have to wait in the jury room the entire day. When jury clerks need jurors, they could be paged and would have to return to the jury room within 10 minutes or face the same penalty given to people who fail to appear for jury duty. In 2007, 27 bench warrants were issued for jurors who did not do their duty.

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Sabaugh believes jurors who have a good experience on jury duty will tend to make good decisions. This program might also reduce the frequency of requests to be excused from jury duty. Each time a juror requests to be excused, there is a cost to the county in terms of computer use, staff time, postage and printing for confirmation letters, and processing. If jurors know they can leave the building, they may be more willing to do their civic duty.

“Jurors will get to know our beautiful downtown, our shops and restaurants,” said Arthur Mullen, director of the Mount Clemens Downtown Development Authority. “They’ll get a flavor of the city and be interested in coming back.”

Sabaugh believes small business owners in Mount Clemens have sufficient capacity to accommodate over 19,000 jurors annually spending more time in the downtown area instead of the jury room. This program would also help Mount Clemens redevelopment efforts by giving jurors who normally may not visit the area an opportunity to see what the city has to offer.

The Macomb County Board of Commissioners approved the bid process and six companies bid on the project. Sabaugh has not recommended a vendor to the board, but estimates the startup cost could be around \$31,000 with an annual cost of about \$4,700. Sabaugh will ask the city commission and DDA to help pay the cost. She said she will propose \$10,000 be used from the county clerk’s budget and will provide staff to run the system. Sabaugh hopes to have some matching funds when she presents her proposal to the Board of Commissioners in the near future. Final approval and selection of a vendor would have to come from the Macomb County Board of Commissioners. Sabaugh also plans to seek approval from the circuit court judges on the actual daily procedure to ensure jurors are available when needed. If a funding proposal can be put together, and the circuit judges and Board of Commissioners approve the plan, Sabaugh hopes to have the system up and running by Memorial Day.

This is not the first improvement Sabaugh proposed for jurors. She also:

- Started a [one-day, one-trial system](#) that reduced jury duty from one week to one day for most jurors and reduced annual costs by \$100,000,
- Partnered with SMART to provide [free bus tickets](#) for jurors without transportation,
- Provides [free wireless Internet](#) service in the jury room so jurors can stay in touch with family or work while waiting to be picked for a trial, and
- Partnered with the Mount Clemens Public Library to provide [free library books](#) delivered from any library in the county so books are waiting when jurors arrive.