

By Josh Adams for [The Tennessean](#)

FRANKLIN — Time and again, Judge Al Nations has asked Williamson County to hire a third judge to help manage the growing caseload in the General Sessions Court. He was rebuffed each time.

Budgets are tight, he was told, and his colleague, Judge Denise Andre, disagreed that a third judge was necessary.

So, Nations was stunned when County Mayor Rogers Anderson came by the courthouse a few weeks ago to announce that another judge would be added to the roster. But this judge would serve almost exclusively in the juvenile court, and Nations and Andre, meanwhile, would no longer hear cases involving minors.

It is the opposite of what Nations has been pleading for.

“The numbers indicated this would be a good time for that,” Anderson said of his interest in hiring the county’s first dedicated juvenile court justice. “I think this would be as good a time as any.”

County commissioners are set to vote tonight on the mayor’s recommendation. By law, only the state legislature has the authority to create the position, so commissioners would actually be asking lawmakers to make it so. Thus far, the mayor’s recommendation has several committee endorsements.

Nations contends that Anderson may be playing politics and is risking the efficiency of the court at the same time.

“If you look at the numbers, the real caseload is in the General Sessions Court,” Nations said.

According to statistics from the Williamson County Juvenile Court, the burden on the system in Williamson County has grown 11 percent from 2001 to 2011. The biggest spikes occurred in 2008 and 2009, but that growth appears to be reversing itself. In 2011, the juvenile court handled 3,922 separate events, which is only marginally more than the 3,822 that came through the court in 2006.

Similar statistics tracked by the Tennessee Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges echo the recent trend of a easing caseload.

Figures from General Sessions Court, however, show the number of cases grew nearly 20 percent from 2008 to 2011. The state does not track the caseload for general sessions courts, and records immediately available through the county date back only as far as 2008.

“You haven’t done it in four years,” Nations said of hiring a third judge. “Why all of a sudden?”

Complicated cases

Anderson’s reasoning is that juvenile cases are becoming more complicated and require more time. Truancy and delinquent behavior are relatively easy to resolve, Anderson said, but the nuanced cases of custody disputes and neglect are a growing segment of the docket. The population of school-age children also continues to grow in Williamson County, the mayor said, so it makes sense to address it.

“I think it works better here to have one individual devote 100 percent of their time to the juvenile system,” Anderson said.

Anderson confirmed that the presumptive nominee for the job is Sharon Guffee, a magistrate in the juvenile court. She recently applied to win Gov. Bill Haslam’s approval for a seat on the circuit court bench, but Haslam appointed a longtime prosecutor instead. Anderson said his consideration of promoting Guffee to the bench precedes her application for the circuit court position.

Nations said he fully endorses Guffee’s ability to do the job. For several years, Guffee has handled the great majority of juvenile cases. His concern is whether it is a misapplication of resources.

Should Guffee win the job, her current position would be left vacant, Anderson said. Cutting a magistrate to add a judge does not bolster the juvenile court’s abilities, Nations said.

The new judge’s first day would be Jan. 1, 2013. The seat would then come up for election in 2014, the winner serving a term of eight years.

2008 2009 2010 2011

General Sessions Court 28,897 26,388 34,030 34,607

Juvenile Court 4,803 4,712 4,145 3,922

Source: Annual case load statistics provided by Williamson County General Sessions Court and Williamson County mayor's office