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Thomas named appellate judge

By Anna C. Irwin
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Blount County Circuit Court Judge D. Kelly Thomas Jr. has been appointed to the Tennessee Court of Criminal Appeals, Eastern Division by Gov. Phil Bredesen.

Thomas, who has served since 1990 as a Circuit Court Judge for the state's 5th Judicial District, fills a vacancy created when his predecessor, Justice Gary Wade, was appointed to the state's Supreme Court.

"Judge Thomas is an experienced legal professional who has proven himself in the courtroom and in private practice," Bredesen said. "I'm confident he will serve the people of Tennessee with fairness, wisdom and professionalism, and I want to thank him for his dedication to our state."

Thomas, 54, is the first appeals court judge in a decade with experience as a trial court judge. He was among 12 local judges, prosecutors and attorneys who applied to fill the vacancy on the appeals court.

"I want to thank Governor Bredesen for this opportunity to serve my state," Thomas said. "I am dedicated to upholding his and the public's trust by supporting our state constitution and administering justice impartially."

"I have enjoyed very much being a judge in Blount County since 1990. I have a great appreciation for the camaraderie and congeniality of all those involved in the justice system here — people from the Attorney General's Office, the Public Defender's Office, the Circuit Court Clerk's Office, and our law enforcement agencies. I will miss that," Thomas said. "I'm looking forward to reviewing cases from all over the state and working with all the judges (at the higher court level)."

The Maryville High School graduate earned his bachelor's degree and law degree at the University of Tennessee. He practiced law in Maryville following his 1977 graduation until he was elected to the Circuit Court post.

Thomas said he will begin his work in the state Court of Criminal Appeals on Nov. 28 and 29 when oral arguments are scheduled before the judicial panel.

The 12 Court of Criminal Appeals judges sit monthly in panels of three in Jackson, Knoxville and Nashville. No witnesses, juries or testimony are present in the Court of Criminal Appeals. Instead, attorneys present oral and written arguments.

Court of Criminal Appeals judges serve eight-year terms. When a vacancy occurs on the court, the Judicial Selection Commission recommends three candidates to the governor, who then appoints a new judge to serve until the next August general election.

Thomas said he understands that retired Judge Kerry Blackwood, who lives in Blount County, will hear cases in Blount County Circuit Court until the governor names a new judge to serve until August 2008. Voters will then select a judge for an eight-year term.

Applications for the post Thomas is vacating will be accepted by the 15-member Judicial Selection Commission, then three candidates from among the applicants will be submitted to the governor who will appoint a new judge for the next two years.

Thomas is president of the Boys and Girls Club's Advisory Board in Blount County and also serves as a board member for the Blount County Food Pantry, as well as for the Blount United Community Credit Union. He said he will continue in those positions. He is president-elect of the Tennessee Judicial Conference and will assume that office in June 2007.

Thomas has taken an active role in supporting East Tennessee's drug court programs, which are designed to reduce the number of second offenses by helping rehabilitate drug dependent citizens and transition them into meaningful, socially responsible lifestyles. He was instrumental in the creation of a Drug Court program in Blount County in 1998 and has presided over the program since then.

Thomas said he will ask the Tennessee Supreme Court to allow him to continue to preside over the Drug Court in Blount County until the governor appoints someone as Circuit Court judge. He said he hopes the program will continue with his successor.
