



September 21, 2023

The Honorable Jonathan D. Gerber, Chair
Judicial Circuit Assessment Committee

Dear Chairman Gerber:

We are writing to state our opposition to any changes in the geographical boundaries of the 14th Judicial Circuit. The 14th Judicial Circuit is comprised of six counties and covers 3,869 square miles. It is the 4th largest Judicial Circuit in Florida and its geographic boundary has remained the same for 90 years. We believe that any changes to our judicial circuit, such as a consolidation with a neighboring circuit, would be extremely disruptive to our community, especially with the substantial growth our circuit has experienced in recent years. While the idea of consolidation might appear to be a streamlining, cost-saving measure, we believe that such a move would have far-reaching negative consequences for our legal system and serve to erode the public trust and confidence in our judicial system. Below, we have outlined our areas of concern:

Diminished Voting Power: The prospect of merging with an adjacent circuit such as the 1st or 2nd Judicial Circuits would diminish our community's voting influence. An absorption into either of these circuits would result in our community's State Attorney and Public Defender being located at offices headquartered in either Pensacola or Tallahassee. This would affect state attorney, public defender and judicial elections; candidates from smaller counties would be at a disadvantage against candidates from larger counties. Simply put, the proposed change would strip away any autonomy left in the system as the voters in the 14th Judicial Circuit would never again be able to elect local candidates to represent our communities because the voting power would lie within the original circuits.

Hindered Access to Justice Consolidating judicial circuits would lead to increased travel times for victims, witnesses, defendants, and attorneys when meeting with the state attorney or public defender. For our community, this could mean up to 100 miles and over 2 hours of travel time one way to either Pensacola or Tallahassee. This would disproportionately affect vulnerable populations, including low-income individuals, elderly, and those without reliable transportation. This would also potentially result in additional attorneys' fees for those hiring private attorneys because of the additional travel time involved.

Limited Quality and Efficiency: The consolidation of judicial circuits would lead to a significant increase in caseloads for judges and court personnel. This, in turn, would result in longer waiting times for trials, hearings, and other court proceedings, ultimately undermining the timely delivery of justice. Furthermore, consolidation would lead to larger, more complex administrative organizations that have historically shown to be more difficult to manage and navigate.

Loss of Local Expertise: Each judicial circuit has its own unique characteristics, demographics, and legal challenges. Local judges and court staff have an in-depth understanding of these nuances, which is crucial for fair and effective decision-making. Consolidation would result in the loss of this valuable local expertise.

Negate Crucial Relationships: Decades of stability within our circuit boundary have allowed our State Attorneys and their staffs to create strong, long-lasting relationships with sheriffs, police chiefs, and multiple state law enforcement agencies. They have also built working partnerships with other agencies, including DCF, Guardian ad Litem, and Children's Advocacy Centers. These important affiliations have facilitated smoother communication channels and elevated the overall efficiency of managing our criminal justice systems.

Impact to Other Agencies: Changing geographical boundaries would also impact the operations of other agencies such as Department of Children and Families, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Corrections Probation Offices, and the Medical Examiner's Office who use the circuit boundary.

Decreased Public Confidence: A decentralized court system often enhances accountability and transparency. Consolidation would create a disconnect between the judicial system and the communities it serves, making it harder for citizens to engage with and understand the legal process.

Nationwide Judicial Circuits: From our research, we have found the majority of states in the nation have significantly more elected prosecuting attorneys per capita. When comparing the number of judicial circuits in all 50 States, only 12 states have less than 20 judicial circuits. In fact, of the 36 states that have 21 or more judicial circuits, 34 have populations significantly less than the State of Florida. Only Texas and California have larger populations and those states have 472 and 58 judicial circuits, respectively. If anything, it might become evident after this judicial circuit study is complete, Florida might need to increase its number of circuits, especially when considering the substantial growth in population Florida has experienced in recent years.

In conclusion, we understand and appreciate the many challenges the Committee is tasked with by studying the efficiency and structures of the circuits. Our legal system is a cornerstone of our democracy, and any changes to its structure should be made with great care and consideration for the impact on access to justice, fairness, and accountability.

Sincerely,

Kyle Shoots, Chairman of the Board

Carol Roberts, President/CEO