Florida Courts to Implement New Long-Range Strategic Plan Starting in 2016

TALLAHASSEE – Florida’s judicial branch has updated its long-range strategic plan, taking into consideration demographic, economic, social, technological and legal challenges likely to face the state’s courts through the year 2021, Chief Justice Jorge Labarga said Tuesday.

“This long-range plan is a comprehensive and balanced blueprint based on more than a year of meticulous work,” Labarga said. “It is faithful to the fundamental role courts play in our society and our government and it also serves as an essential warning of the changing circumstances that have already begun to confront courts and will become even more significant over the next several years.”

The plan – “Justice: Fair and Accessible to All” – was presented to the Supreme Court by the Court’s Judicial Management Council, which includes judges, lawyers and non-lawyers. Frank Smith, director of business development at Global Business Solutions in Pensacola, is one of the non-lawyers on the JMC.

“It’s an awesome plan. I think it is going to be really well received,” Smith said, adding that he was particularly impressed by the way the strategic plan was developed.

“Justice: Fair and Accessible to All” was drafted by a workgroup of the Judicial Management Council, which collected as much data as possible to develop a long-range plan that would allow Florida’s courts to be responsive to the needs of the state’s families, businesses and anyone who turns to the courts. Surveys elicited nearly 6,000 responses from attorneys, witnesses, victims, defendants, jurors, court staff, court clerks, and members of the general public. The JMC workgroup also held six public forums around the state.

Smith attended the public forum in Panama City. “They listened, they gathered the information
from the public,” he said. “It wasn’t put together in a vacuum.”

In addition, the workgroup researched trends and data. One example: By 2030, nearly a quarter of Florida’s population will be over the age of 65. For Florida’s courts this means more probate and guardianship cases, more cases of identity theft and fraud, more cases of elder abuse and traffic accidents. Courts will also have to be able to make accommodations for age-related disabilities and limitations.

“Being responsive to anticipated conditions by preparing for them in advance – this is the only way we will be able to carry out our mission,” Labarga said.

The mission of Florida’s courts was first articulated in 1998: “To protect rights and liberties, uphold and interpret the law, and provide for the peaceful resolution of disputes.” That mission is unchanged in the new plan, which is organized around five broad issue areas and identifies 29 goals.

One issue is identified as “deliver justice effectively, efficiently, and fairly” and has six goals, which include performing judicial duties and administering justice “without bias or prejudice” and ensuring “the fair and timely resolution of all cases through effective case management.”

Another issue focuses on enhancing “access to justice and court services.”

“Florida courts are committed to equal access to justice for all,” the plan reads, noting that the cost of litigation, communication barriers, lack of information, biases and the complexity of legal issues “can create difficulties for those seeking to access the courts to obtain relief.”

“The judicial branch must strive to identify and remove real or perceived barriers to better provide meaningful access to the courts,” the plan reads.

In the fall of 2014, Labarga signed an administrative order creating the Florida Commission on Access to Civil Justice, a 27-member board that includes leaders from all three branches of government, The Florida Bar, the Florida Bar Foundation, civil legal aid providers and the business community. The Commission’s report is due to the Supreme Court by June 30, 2016.

In the new long-range plan, the access issue, which is not limited to civil cases, has six goals, which include making sure court procedures and operations are easily understandable and user-friendly and promoting the use of innovative and effective problem-solving courts and alternative dispute resolutions processes.

The other three broad areas are improving understanding of the judicial process, modernizing the administration of justice and operation of court facilities, and maintaining a professional, ethical and skilled judiciary and workforce.

The plan can be found at http://www.flcourts.org/administration-funding/strategic-planning/