

## SUNDAY FOCUS

# Feazell says district attorney's office needs improvements

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When Vic Feazell swept into the McLennan County district attorney's office with what he saw as a public mandate for change, he vowed to move what he called a dormant District Attorney's office into action.

Seven months and some 1,500 case dispositions later, he says he and his staff are plagued with too much work, too little money and an archaic office system.

And although pleased with his staff's performance, Feazell says improvements are needed in his office, especially in the area of modernization.

"We're out of the crisis management stage," he said, "but we've still got a long way to go before I'll be satisfied."

Feazell, who had no prosecution experience upon taking office Jan. 1, has attracted experienced prosecutors into his office, including a former Harris County attorney with 11 years of prosecution experience and a prosecutor with a total of seven years experience in Potter, Harris and Upshur counties.

Though these attorneys are costing the county higher salaries, (in one case, at least \$7,000-a-year more than the state mean for counties of comparable size to McLennan), Feazell says adequately paid, experienced prosecutors will save his office money and headaches by cutting down turnover rates.

"Getting the staff was quite an accomplishment," he said. "I do not understand the prior philosophy of hiring only brand-new people."

"We've got a job to do here over and above training young lawyers. I need to keep a healthy balance of experience," he added.

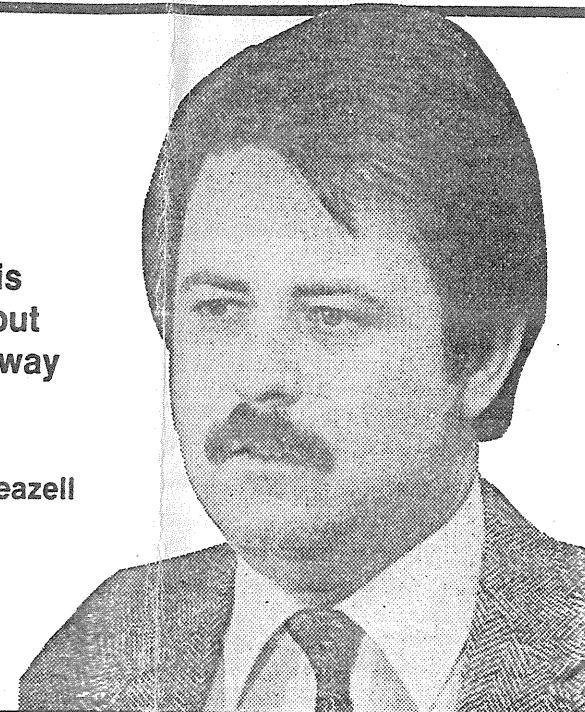
Five of the 10 prosecutors in Feazell's office worked under former District Attorney Felipe Reyna, whom Feazell defeated in the spring of 1982 in the Democratic primary by a 2,099-vote margin.

Feazell has one prosecution slot left to fill, which will bring his staff of attorneys to 12, including himself.

Last week, veteran prosecutor Frank Fitzpatrick retired. A new prosecutor, Kevin Wright, who formerly worked with McLennan County Legal Aid, will come on board next week.

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### 1st 6 MONTHS OF 1983

#### FELONIES

	1983	1982	1981
Cases Filed	336	243	312
Cases Disposed	360	305	295
Cases Pending (June 30)	267	241	203
Dismissals	64	85	50
Acquittals	3	3	3
Jury Trials	22	23	22

#### MISDEMEANORS

	1983	1982	1981
Cases Filed	1336	1002	712
Cases Disposed	1188	731	534
Cases Pending (June 1)	1816	1224	750
Dismissals	221	153	106
Acquittals	5	9	5
Jury Trials	10	15	14

Jan. 1-June 30 of each year

Despite his own lack of prosecution experience, Feazell has coaxed some of the stiffest prison terms out of 54th State District Court juries.

In the three felony trials Feazell has prosecuted, juries have assessed prison terms of 90 years, 200 years (on six counts) and life.

"Even though I've been referred to as a media hound..." Feazell said he believes his efforts to educate potential jurors through public appearances has paid off in stiffer sentences.

As for keeping his campaign promise to get the district attorney "back into the courtroom," Feazell said, "Considering all the work that's had to be done on reorganization, it's been pretty good for me to get into the courtroom at all."

Feazell said he believes he has made strides in office reorganization, but added that the system will remain archaic until the office is computerized.

"It was quite a mess the first two-and-a-half to three months. It took a big part of our time finding out where we were," he said, adding that he was unprepared for the tremendous backlog and "defective" indictments that awaited him.

A state grant for \$40,000 to tie into the county's Burroughs computer system is expected to be approved and would help bring the office "into the 20th Century," he said.

A computerized system would give his staff more time so that it "won't be like life inside a popcorn popper," he said.

A computer also should help keep track of the 1,672 cases that have been filed in his office in the last six months.

Court records show at least 30 percent more cases have been filed in both felony and misdemeanor courts the first six months of this year compared to the same period last year.

The disposition rate has increased by 62 percent in misdemeanor cases, but by only 18 percent in felony cases.

The number of trials in felony court this year has been close to that in past years. But this year's number of misdemeanor trials has fallen, and Feazell says he's in a quandary as to why — especially since he says his prosecutors are making stiffer recommendations in plea-bargain arrangements.

Financial woes continue to haunt Feazell. Earlier this year, he requested \$260,000 from county commissioners to hire 14 new staffers next year.

Commissioners are expected to make final budget decisions in the next month, but they already have indicated they will not approve new staff positions for any county department.

Feazell's staff members have claimed they can make up the extra money to the county in increased fines.

"We think we've contributed considerably to the system," said First Assistant District Attorney Dennis Green. "Felony fines went up 238 percent over a five-month period (in 1983 compared to 1982)."

However, Green acknowledged that the county's records of fine collections are sketchy at best — another reason why computerization is necessary.

Feazell's current budget is \$498,659. In addition, he receives \$25,300 in appropriations from the state Legislature to supplement salaries, and that figure will increase to \$27,650 on Sept. 1.

He also can use hot check fees, which his office collects, without the approval of county commissioners. He cannot, however, supplement his own salary, which currently totals \$52,846 a year from both state and county funds.

During the first seven months of 1983, the District Attorney's office has collected \$67,128.28 in hot check fees and \$161,872.74 in restitution for merchants, according to figures from the office.

During the same period last year, Reyna collected \$62,539.83 in fees and \$139,907.36 in restitution.

Last month, Feazell's hot check fund showed a deficit of \$241.64. On Thursday, County Treasurer Odessa Wells said the hot check fund had a zero balance and that Feazell will supplement salaries this month from state appropriations.

Mrs. Wells said she refused to sign checks drawn on the hot check fund unless the account has enough money to cover the check.

Feazell said his staff will deposit about \$10,000 collected in hot check fees in July into the hot check fund on Monday, bringing it to a "healthy balance. Then we can pay some bills."

During the past six months, expenses out of Feazell's hot check fund have included \$10,137 for office renovations, \$322 for self-guard canisters to protect his staff and \$450 to accountant Stephen Southwell, Feazell's campaign treasurer, to revamp the hot check department's accounting system, he said.

County commissioners have criticized Feazell for buying his staff food during late-night work hours and for ordering flowers out of the hot check fund.

"What I'm looking at is staff burn-out," Feazell said, adding that his staff continues to work late hours and weekends, uncompensated. "What I'm doing makes good business sense."