

**Remarks made by Chief District Court Judge Robert Steele
(Twelfth Judicial District, Fayetteville, Cumberland County)
before the NC House Judicial Redistricting Committee on Sept. 19, 2017**

(Starts at 1:57)

Thank you, Chairman Burr and legislative members. My name is Robert Steele. I'm the Chief District Court judge in the Twelfth (12th) Judicial District, which is Fayetteville, Cumberland County. It is a single county district. About a third of a million folks live there. Our courthouse runs about seventy-two thousand (72,000) citizens each month that come through its doors. We'll do two thousand (2,000) or so domestic violence civil protective orders in our District Courts. I've been a judge for twenty-three (23) years now, elected spring of '94.

For half of the time on the bench, I was the only judge in Cumberland County that was put to work in a contested election. As Chief District Court judge, it's a privilege to speak with you. All of my twenty-three and a half years (23 ½) have been spent in domestic court. I've been certified as a family court judge, certified as a DSS (Dept. of Social Services) juvenile judge, certified as a Juvenile Delinquent Court judge. So literally families, children, lives, are my life's work, and I'm very grateful for that opportunity.

I've also...and I would encourage you to take a look at the "Celebrate NC Courts" website. I am the ex officio historian who has written the two pieces on the history of North Carolina courts, and also the history of our District Courts in recognition of a number of milestones that we are in the midst of: the Fifty (50) Year Anniversary of the formation of our District Courts in 1966; the Fifty (50) Year Anniversary this year of the establishment of our Court of Appeals; the Two Hundred and Fortieth (240th) Year for our Superior Courts, which were established by an act of your legislative body back on November 15th of 1777; and then the Two Hundredth (200th) Anniversary next year of our Supreme Court.

As I listened, many of the questions that were asked were very pointed, very legitimate. I believe we all have the common ground of providing the best system of justice for our citizens. I think we all find common ground in realizing that fifty (50) years, sixty (60) years now, in examining districting and the issue of our courts, it's time to take a look at things. I have found a number of the answers rooted in the history.

We've talked and heard from Superior Court judges that, by legislative act, there were only three that your body created back in 1777. You also designed six (6) districts. These three (3) judges were to hold court two (2) times a year in six (6) districts, six cities. And they were circuit judges 'cause literally they rode the circuit on horseback or buggy, and they could not take the same route two times in a row

and hence our Superior Court judges still retain to this day that notion of “riding the circuit.”

As a District Court Judge, we had the opportunity in Cumberland County to on August 8th [2017] have Representative Burr come in and speak with us about the [HB717] proposal. Again, the judges, I think on the whole...it's not an issue of examining what we have and making improvements upon it. Cumberland County, by way of example, has ten (10) District Court judges. Of those ten (10) judges, seven (7) of them would fall under the District 15B if they were called upon to file for reelection next year. **Our county essentially would be divided into one 15A city district, Fayetteville, and then three other quadrants that would comprise 15B. Three (3) of the five (5) current judges would preside and run presumably in 15A. Seven (7) of the existing judges would presumably run for five (5) seats in 15B.**

2:01 All of our judges, I will say, represent, reflect our community. I understand the divisions, proposed districts, are broken up by population, but we may have what may be the most diverse district in the state. Currently of the ten (10) District Court and four (4) Superior Court judges, we have seven (7) that are African-American, six (6) that are white, one (1) that is Hispanic. The population breakdown almost is identical, absolutely identical, to that existing percentage of folks involved. Of our ten (10) District Court judges, we have one (1) African American/Korean, one (1) Hispanic, five (5) African-Americans, and three (3) white males. **I fear that should we take at least Cumberland County's district, divide it into a 15A and 15B, that we would no longer have a bench that not only is diverse but truly is reflective of the society, the community that we hold court in.** So, I simply am here to say, thank you for this common interest we have. We look forward to your work.

(2:03:11) And then lastly, in looking back, there is much talk of the Bell Commission, J. Spencer Bell's Commission. This was a movement that began in 1955. The governor, Luther Hodges, was involved in it, the North Carolina Bar, clearly the State Legislature, the judges at the time – who would tell you the fifteen hundred (1500) different types of courts that were in existence in 1955 - with a hodge-podge of jurisdictions, how they collected their pay for the judicial officials, whether they traveled or not – simply was not working properly for the citizens. **And it took the Bell Commission four years. And they went to the Legislature, and it took the Legislature in '59, and '61, and '63 and finally in 1966, adopting what we now say we haven't looked at things in the last fifty (50) to sixty (60) years, and it's the time. It was a deliberative, concerted effort and it has spanned three generations in success. And I think that formula of looking backwards at history, and looking forward to how we can best design our legal system, demands that same method and attention.** And I know the commitment is here, and I thank you for it. Thank you, sir.