

Arizona Capitol Times 8 High-Tech Courts To Debut in Arizona This Month

By Dave Maass - June 1, 2001

Arizona is not on the cutting edge of court technology, instead, the state is on the "bleeding edge."

Or so says Mesa attorney Mark Lassiter, a member of the e-courtroom committee of Maricopa Superior Court.

"Arizona is probably the most technologically progressive state as far as court technology goes," he said.

Only two weeks ago, Maricopa County revealed its e-courtrooms in a push to reduce complications and streamline court times and costs.

Each courtroom features video monitors for evidence display and instant video recording throughout the courtroom. Jurors can also use flat screen monitors to take notes.

The county plans to begin operating eight e-courtrooms in June in the downtown Phoenix court complex. Two more high-tech courtrooms will be available at the southeast court facility in Mesa by 2002.

The state is a hotbed of litigation technology, hosting a number of top-rated legal software companies including Blue Knight Technology Inc., Verdict Systems and inData Corporation.

"All of their respective products are well received nationwide," Mr. Lassiter said. "Many of the best litigation technology companies are not only located in the state, but in Maricopa County."

Tempe-based Verdict Systems and Scottsdale-based Blue Knight Technology have an arrangement so that their trial support programs are compatible with one another.

Attorneys can use Blue Knight Technology's EL CID! Database to manage evidence, which will plug right into Verdict System's Sanction trial presentation software.

"Phoenix on a national level is ahead of the power curve," Verdict System operations director Dan Bowen said. "This is not something that was necessarily born and bred out of Silicon Valley."

Attorney General Janet Napolitano's office currently uses the Sanction product, which Mr. Bowen describes as "PowerPoint on steroids."

Mr. Bowen said that Arizona's legal technology industry has much to do with the cooperative relationship between vendors.

"What nice is we have partners like Blue Knight," he said. "We do everything on a handshake, nothing contractual, just trust and belief in those that you believe are the best in the industry."

That's not to say that competition doesn't complicate or drive innovation.

Last month litigation software-maker Gilbert-based inData settled a lawsuit with Verdict Systems, whose principals were former employees of inData. Terms of settlement remain confidential.

"I can promise you there will not be a single program that does everything that is needed in litigation support," said Mr. Lassiter, whose firm Barnes & Lassiter represented inData in the lawsuit.

Recently, inData was contracted to transfer all the remaining discovery documents in the Oklahoma City bombing case to digital images.

Although Arizona may be hot with technology, attorneys are still cool to the idea of an electronic legal system, Mr. Lassiter said.

"Lawyers are the most techno-phobic professionals in the world," he said. With programs like EL CID!, "it takes the whole way the organization processes information and changes it from a paper processing paradigm to a digital processing paradigm, and that's the hard part."

Nevertheless, he said, attorneys will have to accept technology or else.

"If people aren't going to use computer tools to manage, there's no way they're going to keep up."