



Judicial Council of Georgia Administrative Office of the Courts

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PRESS RELEASE

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Georgia's Municipal Court Judges Discuss the *Ferguson Report*

St. Simons Island and Savannah, GA — The Council of Municipal Court Judges (CMCJ) and Georgia Municipal Association, Inc. (GMA) recently met in St. Simon's Island and Savannah to discuss ways to prevent some of the problems identified in the [Department of Justice's report](#) on Ferguson, MO from happening in Georgia.

Two members of GMA Alison Earles and Rusi Patel, Associate General Counsels, attended the CMCJ's Executive Committee and Annual Business Meetings and the CMCJ's Annual Law and Practice Update Conference on St. Simon's Island on June 21- 24, 2016. CMCJ members, Judge Thomas "Tommy" Bobbitt, Municipal Court of Soperton, and Judge Bob Leitch, Municipal Court of Decatur, attended several sessions at the GMA's Annual Conference in Savannah on June 24-26, 2016. Judge Donald Schaefer, Municipal Court of Johns Creek, served on two panels speaking to city attorneys and to elected city officials.

At the CMCJ's Annual Law and Practice Conference on St. Simon's Island, GMA sought feedback on a survey to be sent to the state's municipal court judges. The survey invites judges to identify areas of training for city officials in order for city officials to better understand the role of the municipal court and the legal requirements for all municipal courts.

Ms. Earles participated in a discussion with the CMCJ's Executive Committee to help understand the issues facing all municipal courts, including how to successfully deal with city officials who have little experience with the court system. "GMA provides training and services

designed to help cities take advantage of economies of scale and sharing best practices. Municipal court judges can identify barriers to compliance that city officials are in a position to address, and can identify many different ways to comply with defendants' constitutional rights."

Judge Leslie Spornberger Jones, Immediate Past President of the CMCJ, stated, "Every judge in this room has experienced a situation where their city either pressured them, held an appointment over their heads, or in some way tried to focus the court on revenue. Our best judges have always chosen to uphold the law and not give in to such pressure, even if that means losing their position as a judge." But it shouldn't be that way, she continued. "City officials should understand that they have sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution, just like our judges have, and everyone has a duty to ensure that municipal courts are courts of law, where the community can see justice done, not revenue generated." Judge Jones later taught a class called *Georgia Reflections on Ferguson*, see: <http://tinyurl.com/hkdugmt>

Mr. Rusi Patel, GMA General Counsel and a former city prosecutor, teaches city officials how courts run independently and ethically. Mr. Patel said it is "fundamental to the separation of powers that municipal governing authorities provide proper staffing and support of the municipal court while not interfering with judicial decisions of the municipal court judge. A municipal court is part of the judicial branch and in order to ensure proper checks and balances in our justice system, judicial decisions must remain with the judge."

At the GMA conference, Judge Bobbitt and Judge Leitch participated in multiple policy discussions about municipal courts, focusing on policies that will help ensure public safety, proper running of independent courts, and best practices. Judge Bobbitt stated, "I believe that it is very important for judges to attend the GMA meetings and interact with our city officials. It is at these meetings that policy positions are decided; many of which confront our courts. Those officials need our input to fully understand the issues at hand and how we can work together to address them and legislation that will affect our courts and cities in the future."
