

Candidates allowed to air views

Judge says opinions not 'proper'

Story and Photo By
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Of the Emerald

A clause in the Oregon Judicial Conduct Code dealing with how much judicial candidates can say concerning public issues has received a broad interpretation by the Oregon Judicial Conduct Committee, widening the ground of election discussion topics — an interpretation eyed with trepidation by Lane County Circuit Court Judge George Woodrich.

"My position hasn't changed," said Woodrich. "I don't think we should publicly discuss our views on public issues. It compromises our neutrality."

A Register-Guard questionnaire, asking judicial candidates their opinions on the death penalty, punishment and rehabilitation, and other issues prompted the interpretation. Judge James Hargreaves, in a letter to the conduct committee, said he and Woodrich were unsure as to whether they could answer the questions and still remain within the boundaries of the campaign code, which prohibits discussion of "public issues" by judicial candidates.

Woodrich said that a May 1 memo from Arnold Denecke, Chief Justice of the Oregon Supreme Court, to the judges draws attention to Canon 7, the campaign clause, and warns judges that removal or suspension from office could result from violation of the canon.

Woodrich feels that a judicial candidate's opin-

ion on public issues is not really important, and can diminish his position of objectiveness.

"I'm obliged to follow law that is on the books right now. That's my sworn duty," Woodrich said. "If I announce my views on an existing law...I think this compromises my neutrality."

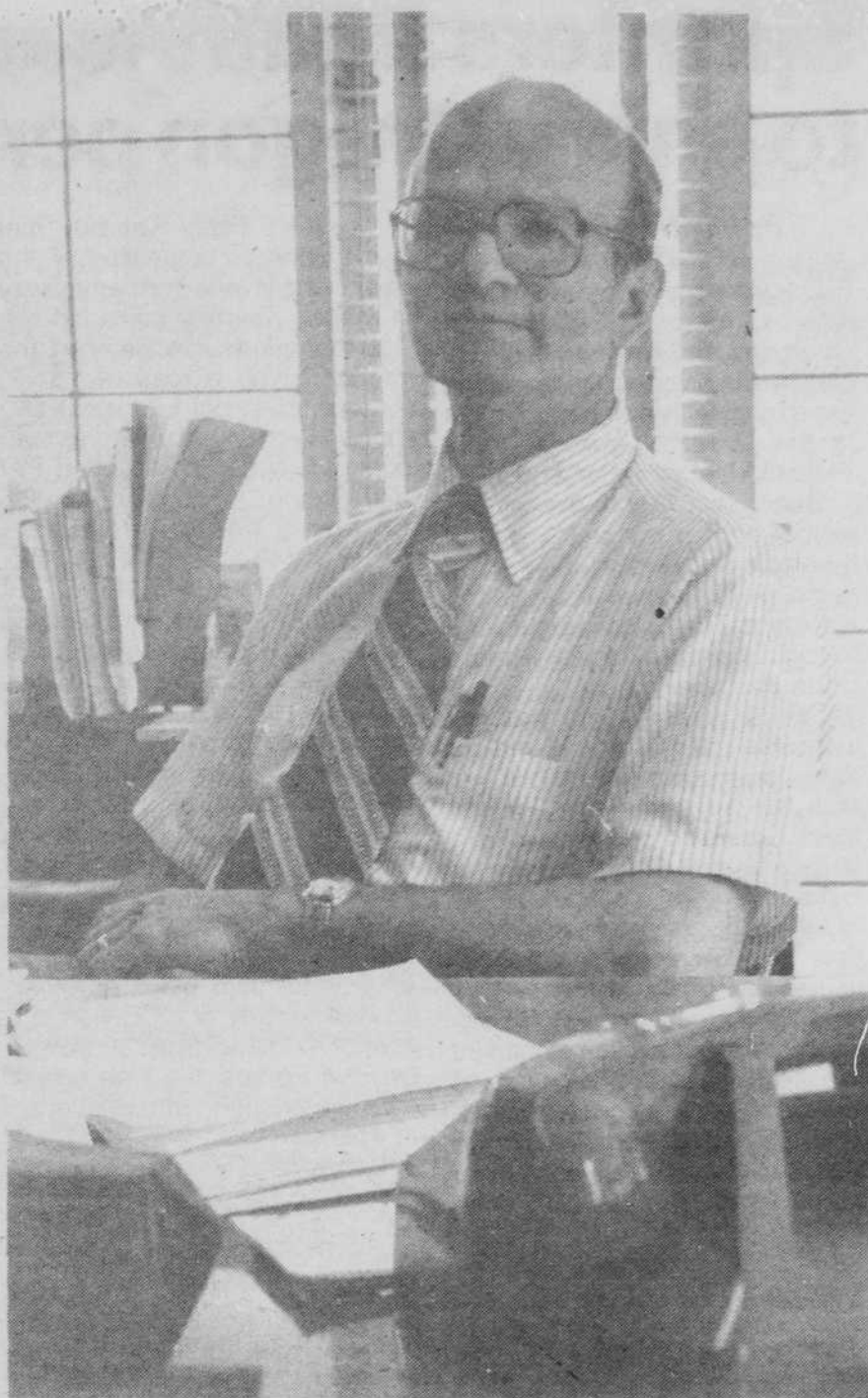
"I think I can make some general statements (concerning issues) but detailing my views isn't proper," said Woodrich.

"A judge is not part of the political process," maintains Woodrich, referring to the fact that judges do not make laws. "A proper forum for expressing political views is in the legislature."

Woodrich said that on the state supreme court and appellate court level, law is often, in effect, created, changed and interpreted. But at the circuit court level, "Judges don't make the law," Woodrich said. "Our job is to simply apply the law as it is."

If Canon 7 had been interpreted conservatively, limiting discussion of issues, then, said Woodrich, "The only thing you'll be campaigning on is qualifications." He feels, "The very fact that they have this canon focuses on the real issue — a candidate's qualification for office."

"A judge is a product of his entire life experience," Woodrich continued. "His temperament, proper perspective, his ability to listen to both sides, his legal ability, and his experience in every aspect of the law — both civil and criminal — these are the important qualifications."



Judge George Woodrich

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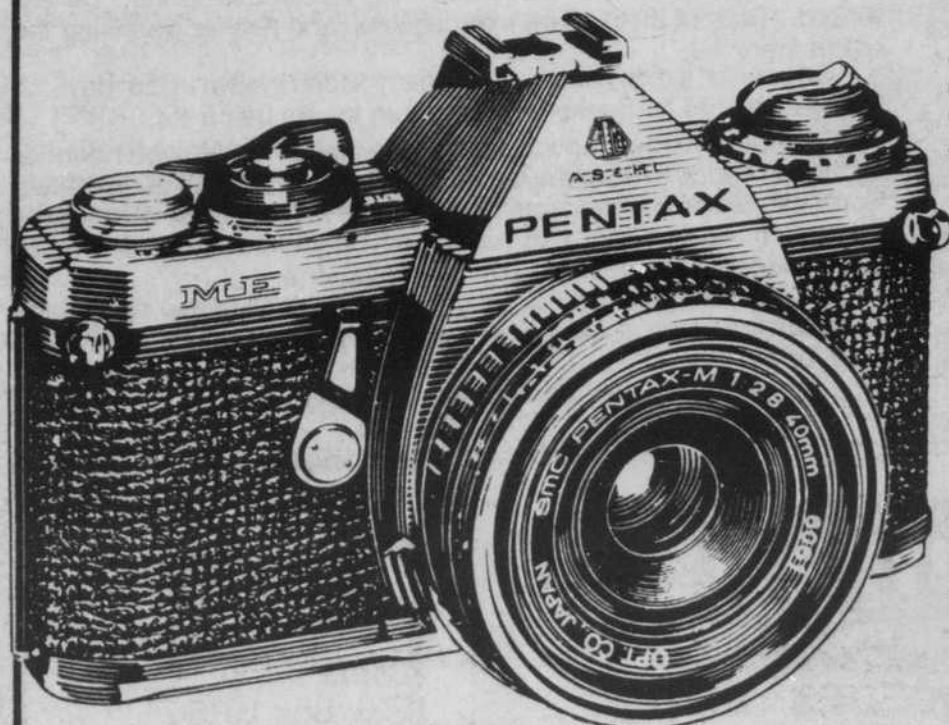
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