

THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER OF THE NEW YORK STATE GOVERNMENT

The Legislative Gazette

DECEMBER 16, 2002 VOLUME 25 NUMBER 41

Copyright ©2002 Legislative Gazette

P.O. BOX 7329, ALBANY, NY 12224

Judicial conduct panelists hear complaint

By CHARLES GREEN
Gazette staff writer

When four panelists met Wednesday to discuss The New York State Commission on Judicial Conduct, Elena Sassower, co-founder and coordinator of the Center for Judicial Accountability, was there to let them know she thought the commission was corrupt and unlawful.

The panelists, on the other hand, spoke about the good work of the commission.

Sassower questioned what the panel, made up of two members of the commission, one former member and one former member of California's equivalent, would have to say, except that they were doing a good job.

The commission, established in 1974, was set up to provide a forum for citizens who have complaints against judges, while assuring judges that complaints filed against them will be handled fairly. There is such a commission in each of the 50 states, California having set up the first in 1960.

In New York, the commission consists of 11 members, four judges, four attorneys and three lay people.

Since then, Stephen R. Coffey, one of the panelists and a member of the commission, said that deal making and corrupt practices by judges have seriously declined.

"Thank God for this commission," Coffey said. "You don't have the workings inside judge's chambers that we have seen and we saw historically."

Judge Juanita Bing Newton, a former member of the commission, agreed that it has done good work.

"It is one of the fairest organizations and agencies that

I've had the pleasure to deal with," Newton said.

The panelists also spoke of the tremendous workload that the commission has to deal with, saying that they receive thousands of complaints a year, each of which has to be examined.

"When I got this appointment I called Sen. Bruno and I said, 'thank you for this job with no money and a lot of work and probably a lot of agony in between,'" Coffey said.

Judge John Racanelli, former chairman of the California Commission on Judicial Performance, said that though the budget in California is about 50 percent higher than it is here, New York deals with about twice the case volume.

When the panelists moved to a question and answer period, Sassower took her chance to allege that the commission is corrupt and that it purposely ignores cases for judges. Sassower said that there has been no legislative oversight of the commission in more than 15 years and that when then-Comptroller Edward Regan had filed a report in 1989, he had found problems.

Sassower also slammed two large boxes onto her table and said the boxes contained court documents which verified the commission's corruption.

Robert Tembeckjian, deputy administrator and deputy counsel for the commission said that Regan's 1989 report on the commission dealt mostly with its finances, which he found to be satisfactory. Tembeckjian said that Regan's only problem was that he wanted to see cases that had been dismissed, but that by law the commission is allowed to withhold such information.