

# PHOENIX REPUBLIC

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## MUSIC

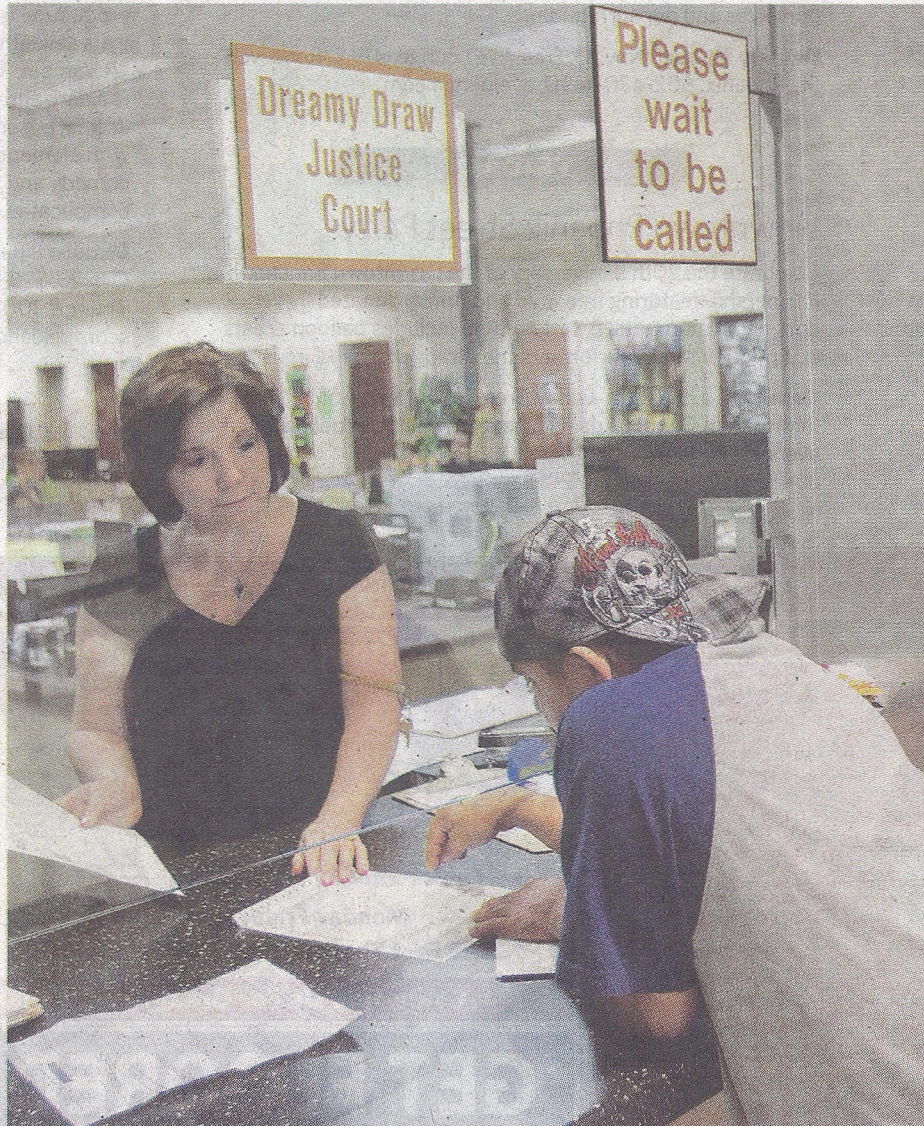


### Boys Choir series returns Thursday

The Phoenix group's top-tier choir, made up of about 30 of the group's most experienced boys, will sing in Memorial Hall at Steele Indian School Park as the monthly concert series starts. Tickets for Boys Choir shows typically run \$20 to \$25, but the Thursday series will cost \$10.

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### Old cemetery is spruced up



Frank Conti, justice of the peace for Dreamy Draw Justice Court, speaks with a defendant.

## MOUNTING CASELOAD

The Dreamy Draw Justice Court has seen an upswing in civil lawsuits since the economic downturn. The spike has taxed court staff because civil cases are more labor intensive and prolonged than other cases the court handles, such as criminal traffic cases or protective-order hearings. Civil cases also generate limited revenue.

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# Economy hikes load for Justice Court

Tough times increase civil lawsuits involving money matters, JP says

By Michael Ferraresi

THE REPUBLIC | AZCENTRAL.COM

As he begins his day, Justice of the Peace Frank Conti eyes the pile of yellow case files stacked a couple of feet high on a shelf at his office.

The color denotes civil lawsuits over unpaid credit-card debts, homeowners association disputes, and default judgments on personal loans.

Conti, who presides over cases at Dreamy Draw Justice Court, said he has seen an upswing in civil litigation at the court since the national economy took a dive two years ago.

In fiscal 2009-10, the northeast Phoenix court handled 8,081 civil filings, according to Maricopa County court records. Conti said the civil filings are more than in past years.

"I see yellow in my sleep," Conti said.

Conti said the civil-litigation spike has taxed court staff because civil cases are the more labor-intensive and prolonged in court than other cases handled by Justice Court, such as criminal traffic cases or protective-order hearings. Civil cases also generate limited revenue, unlike criminal cases where fines are imposed and collected.

Dreamy Draw Justice Court is at the Maricopa County Northeast Regional Court Center southeast of Arizona 51 and Union Hills Drive. The court's precinct boundaries represent a highly-residential area from Union Hills Drive to Glendale Avenue between Seventh Street and Tatum Boulevard.

Civil lawsuits cost \$80 to file. Six of the 10 clerks at Dreamy Draw Justice Court handle civil cases exclusively. Justice Court handles civil cases where \$10,000 or less is at stake.

Many go to trial or involve a detailed sequence of events over several months, including discovery motions and mediation hearings, Conti said. Others involve garnishment hearings where findings and judgments are contested.

While residents continue to seek litigation on civil cases, Conti and his staff continue to work on criminal cases and



TOM TINGLE/THE REPUBLIC

Dreamy Draw Justice Court Justice of the Peace Frank Conti speaks with David Burch, 53, of Gilbert, who was found not guilty because Burch was sent to the wrong court. Conti said he has seen an upswing in civil litigation involving money issues.

others with more of a public-safety focus.

Dreamy Draw ranks No. 4 of the county's 25 Justice Courts in orders of protection filings in the past fiscal year ending July 1, records show.

Conti said he has presided over as many as 35 protective-order hearings in a day, many of which include battered women who fear for the safety of their families.

"People think all we do are weddings," said Conti, who was elected in 2008. "But it's a constant stream of human difficulty and misery every day."

At the end of the day, around 5 p.m., Conti marries couples, which he describes as the highlight of his day.

"I usually tell people, 'That's the most fun I've had all day, thank you,'" he said.

Most revenue collected by Justice Courts comes from misdemeanor criminal traffic cases, drunk-driving citations and photo-speed enforcement citations. The minimum fine for a first-time DUI offense is \$1,400, for example.

Records show Dreamy Draw generated more than \$640,000 in revenue in fiscal 2009-10, including only \$760 from freeway photo speed-enforcement citations. The court has also seen a smaller photo-enforcement caseload than other courts because there are no stationary cameras on the stretch of Arizona 51 under the court's boundaries.

The statewide photo-enforcement program ended this summer, but Justice Courts were faced with adjudicating the cases when the program was running.

Dreamy Draw handled 703 criminal

traffic cases last year, which according to court records was among the lowest criminal traffic caseloads in the Valley.

Northeast Phoenix resident Nicolas Herrera waited last week with about 10 other people to make appearances on DUI cases, a citation for driving on a suspended license, and possession of drug paraphernalia.

Herrera was contesting a speeding ticket in which an Arizona Department of Public Safety officer clocked him at 95 mph on Arizona 51.

"It's a nuisance because I have to take time from school and work to come down here," said Herrera, 27.

"(Conti) seemed pretty nice and understanding," Herrera said. "He's trying to help people out, get them in and out of here."