

Steinbach lawyer likes cameras in courts

by Chris Gareau

A PILOT project is putting video cameras in Manitoba courts. Steinbach lawyer Michael Dyck sees the move as a good one and in the public's interest.

A Queen's Bench murder trial's verdict in April was the first to be broadcast under the program. Cameras were in court for a Manitoba Court of Appeal decision on a triple murder case that was reserved last month. A provincial court's drug and weapons docket was broadcast on May 20. All cases have been in Winnipeg so far.

The next is Friday morning's Court of Appeal hearing dealing with a man challenging his sentence of six and a half years in prison for impaired driving causing death and bodily harm last year. The hearing is scheduled to start at 9:30 a.m. and Winnipeg media outlets are streaming it live on their websites.

Dyck believes more eyes watching what happens in courtrooms through cameras means an air of seriousness would weigh more on people in court.

"I think the biggest pro for it is sometimes in court lawyers can get comfortable at a certain point, and sometimes formalities go to the wayside because we're all familiar with the process and we're familiar with each other... For accused individuals, sometimes I think that lack of formality changes how they view the proceedings because proceedings are serious... I think it's a good thing for the public perception of justice," said Dyck, who admitted he likes informality personally.

That formality was evident in the cases that have been broadcast so far. It is a reality far removed from the courtroom dramas on American television, not only in substance but also in style – even Dyck said he would not watch most proceedings.

Dyck points out that what most Canadians know of the legal system comes from scripted television. He believes having cameras show the reality of Canadian law may help alleviate many misconceptions.

"If people actually do start

watching, they might learn a little about the justice system and I think the more you learn about it, the more you can understand it and the less enraged people typically get. Public opinion is an important thing but, especially when you look at some legal tests (in sentencing), it's in the public's mind would this bring the administration of justice into disrepute. But it's always an informed public; so it's not going into the street and asking people if this guy should have gotten bail or not," explained Dyck.

There are entire channels on cable dedicated to covering U.S. court cases. Most of those involve editing down hours or days of footage to keep a larger audience interested. Dyck suggested that if that were to be allowed in Manitoba, the question of who controls the editing process and the thus the context of the case would be an important one. He gave examples of having the court system handle it by making videos available on its own website versus having the media do what they think works best.

"If the media is allowed to sink their teeth into it, the novelty won't be a factor; it's going to be something that's here to stay because there's often times news stories, if you can't get a quote from a lawyer it kind of makes for poor television... If they can have control to edit things I think that would make it last," said Dyck.

The Steinbach lawyer, who was called to the bar in 2012, was curious who would watch court coverage and was unsure in the long run what it would mean if viewership stayed high as an entertainment factor.

"A lot of young people, their dream isn't necessarily to have a profession or career. Sometimes their dream is simply to be famous; it doesn't matter how that happens... Cameras definitely change the way people act because they know they're being watched

"Are people going to go to law school to be famous? I don't think so," concluded Dyck.

Media can apply to broadcast any court room proceeding. Requests are considered by a judge on a case by case basis.