

# Judicial reform group challenges O'Rourke judgeship

By **Bill Dentzer and David McKay Wilson**  
Staff Writers

A self-styled judicial reform group is challenging outgoing County Executive Andrew O'Rourke's pending appointment to the state Court of Claims and wants the report of a judicial screening committee that recommended him made public.

It is the same group, led by a disbarred lawyer and her daughter, that produced a 50-page critique of O'Rourke's nomination to the federal bench in 1991. Its opposition, as then, is based on what it cites as O'Rourke's lack of litigation experience.

O'Rourke was nominated for the judgeship by Gov. George Pataki on Dec. 12 and is expected to win confirmation in the Republican-controlled state Senate early next month. He would sit in White Plains but would hear cases originating in Dutchess and Orange counties.

The Center for Judicial Accountability has written to the governor's office requesting the report of the screening committee that rated O'Rourke "highly qualified" for the post. It cited a state law that makes such reports public after an appointment is announced.

Michael McKeon, a Pataki spokesman, said no written report was produced.

"I don't think there is a report," McKeon said. "They interviewed him and they voted, and then they communicated that to the governor."

The reform group and its predecessor, the Ninth Judicial Committee, have been led by Doris Sassower, a disbarred lawyer, and her daughter, Elena Ruth Sassower. Doris Sassower, a former head of the state Women's Bar Association, was suspended in 1991 for failing to undergo a court-ordered competency test.

The group had challenged O'Rourke's earlier nomination based on his responses to a Senate Judiciary Committee questionnaire. Asked to list the 10 most significant legal cases he worked on, O'Rourke listed only three.

At the time, O'Rourke noted that he had not actively practiced

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law since becoming county executive in 1983. He said most of his records were lost, misplaced or thrown out by his former law partner.

O'Rourke's nomination was blocked by unrelated political maneuvering in the Democrat-controlled Senate.

Elena Sassower said O'Rourke could only have cited the same three cases in the review for the state judgeship. The group is seeking a copy of the questionnaire given to prospective judicial appointees.

In a letter she delivered to O'Rourke yesterday, she also asked him to waive confidentiality and give her group a copy of his completed questionnaire, "assuming you completed a questionnaire."

"At the present moment, the process is all but hermetically sealed," Sassower said.

O'Rourke declined to respond directly to Sassower's criticisms yesterday but addressed the issue of his qualifications in an interview Wednesday. He said he was qualified, noting that he was involved with "every facet of the law" as county executive.

"I've been involved in hundreds of lawsuits," O'Rourke said. "I never thought that not being a practicing lawyer would be a detriment to becoming a judge."

He acknowledged that he may be rusty on legal procedure, but expected that he could get up to speed quickly. He also planned to hire a knowledgeable aide for assistance.