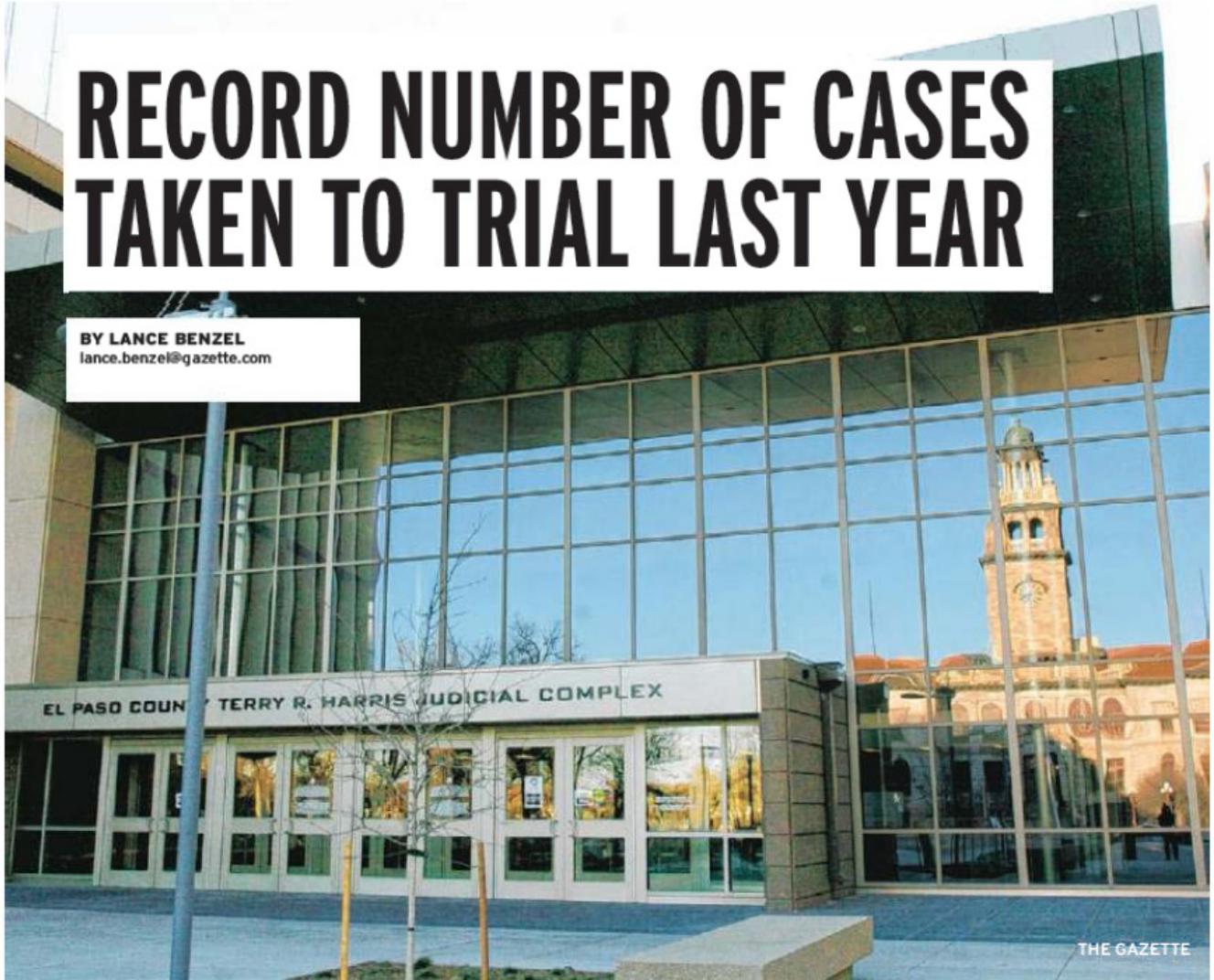


COUNTY COURTS

RECORD NUMBER OF CASES TAKEN TO TRIAL LAST YEAR

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THE GAZETTE

When District Attorney Dan May took office in 2009, he wanted to take a tough line on driving under the influence and domestic violence cases. He also wanted his rookie prosecutors to get more trial experience — face time in front of juries — on traffic and misdemeanor cases so they'd be better prepared for the big leagues: felony cases.

That philosophy of more trials and fewer plea agreements resulted in a record-breaking year

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for trials in the El Paso County Combined Courts even though overall criminal filings declined. All that experience will come in handy after Colorado Springs' record number of homicides, 32 in 2011, start working their way through the court system in 2012.

Two of the area's highest-profile

defendants, Detra Farries and Hanif Sims, go on trial the same day, Jan. 30.

Farries is accused of vehicular homicide, manslaughter and leaving the scene of an accident in the February dragging death of Colorado Springs tow-truck driver Allen Lew Rose.

Sims is accused of first-degree murder in the death of his 7-year-old daughter, Genesis.

Of course, May could not have predicted all the murder cases. But he clearly made it a priority to get rookie prosecutors in front

of juries.

"That's our training ground for young attorneys, and it's also taking a tough line on appropriate cases," May said.

El Paso County judges and magistrates presided over 376 trials last year, topping the previous record of 337 set in 2008, according to figures supplied by jury commissioner Dennis McKinney. The numbers include all criminal, traffic and civil trials.

Of that total, a record 183 were

SEE TRIALS • PAGE 2

TRIALS: Tally included 11 for first-degree murder

FROM PAGE 1

county court trials, both misdemeanor and traffic cases. That's a 30 percent jump from 2010.

Felony trials in District Court, meanwhile, remained constant, hovering around 200 in both 2010 and 2011, the figures show.

Both courts are under the same roof at the El Paso County Combined Courts building in downtown Colorado Springs.

McKinney's figures do not

reflect activity at Municipal Court, which has jurisdiction over city ordinances.

Trials in Teller County — the other half of the 4th Judicial District — also set a record in 2011 with 17 civil and criminal trials. The county's previous record came in 2008, McKinney said.

The 376 trials is a record but represents just a fraction of the tens of thousands of cases filed in the District Attorney's Office in Teller and El Paso counties each year, according to statistics

available on the Colorado Judicial Branch website.

Most filings end in plea agreements. But clearly the jump in cases going to trial is proof that May was serious about a tough stand on certain types of cases.

As part of May's revamped training, new recruits must complete 15 county court trials, a switch from an earlier policy that saw some attorneys advance to District Court after only one or two, the district attorney said.

At the same time, May set

a goal to increase the number of trials in county court from about 150 a year to about 200 a year.

Felony trials also rose on May's watch, according to figures he supplied showing that the office hit a record in 2010 with about 165 felony trials and nearly matched it this year, with about 150 trials.

"Those are the two highest totals in the history of this office," he said.

McKinney and May keep separate tallies of court tri-

als.

The District Attorney's Office still is compiling figures for the year and hasn't completed a breakdown of its prosecutions, May said.

Of the trials in District Court this year, 11 were for first-degree murder, tying the number of first-degree murder trials last year, McKinney said.

The figures show that 26,000 people reported for jury duty this year. Of those, about 12 percent ended up serving on a jury.