The Grand Island Independent
EST. IN 1870
Chance of storms, High 86 Low 66
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 6, 2008
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Malaysian visitors study judicial systems in Grand Island

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In Malaysia, possession of less than half a pound of marijuana can bring the death sentence.

"The drug laws are very strict, on trafficking especially," said Sreekant Pillai, an attorney from Malaysia.

His colleague, Jerald Gomez, agreed.

"It destroys the fabric of society," Gomez said.

The men and three other attorneys from Malaysia — Chan Wai Ling, Vazeer Alam bin Mydin Meera and Sarbjit Singh Khaira — were visiting Grand Island Tuesday as part of the International Visitor Leadership Program.

The focus for their trip, which lasts through Saturday, is the federal, state, county and local judicial systems.

During their Grand Island stay, the group watched a jury selection in Hall County District Judge Teresa Luther's courtroom, met with Central Nebraska Drug Court personnel, visited the Hall County attorney's and public defender's offices, and toured the Nebraska Law Enforcement Training Center, among other things.

Ling was impressed by the community-based initiatives to keep young people out of jail, such as the drug court and community service programs. She believed such programs could be used in Malaysia.

Malaysia is located in southeast Asia and has a large immigrant population. Many of the 25 million people living there are of Arab, Indian and/or Chinese descent.

Pillai said many of the things they'd learned during the trip will be helpful in their homeland. He'd like to see the Malaysian judicial system streamlined to work better and adopt some of the policies used by American police, legal aid workers and child advocates.

In Malaysia, the judges and attorneys are appointed and all trials are bench trials, he said.

"We don't have juries," he said.

As such, watching the jury selection was very interesting and the group said Luther was very accommodating. Pillai said their visit with Hall County Public Defender Gerry Piccolo also gave him a lot of insight into the American judicial system.

During their trip, the attorneys have also visited legal aid offices, spoken to attorneys working in civil litigation, visited the House of Representatives and saw the White House.

On Tuesday, they also met U.S. Rep. Adrian Smith, who happened to be at the Riverside Golf Club while they were there.

"It's been great," Gomez said. "You have a beautiful country."