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Grange Week was April 19-25.

The annual event allows the Grange's members to attend sessions updating issues of concern, as well as an opportunity to meet with legislators to discuss the issues.

The one-day event, held at the Harrisburg Sheraton Inn East in Union Deposit, culminated with a legislative banquet, designed to allow Grange members from across the state to sit down with their representatives at a meal for informal and direct conversation.

Wolff, one of several speakers, represented the Pennsylvania Civil Justice Coalition — a rejuvenated coalition that has modified its strategy from calling for "tort reform" to calling for "lawsuit abuse" reform.

The idea is this: not many people know that the word "tort" refers to a wrong done someone, involving a breach of contract, through which civil, not criminal, solutions apply.

Those familiar with the two O.J. Simpson trials (criminal and civil) should be able to distinguish between the two: Simpson was found not guilty of murder in the criminal trial, but was found liable for the death in the civil trial.

The types of cases have different requirements for evidence and for reasonable doubt. With a civil case, the evidence can leave a lot of doubt about who did what, instead focusing on who is responsible for making things right again.

Criminal acts are supposed to be proven beyond a reasonable doubt.

Wolff polled the audience, asking for those who knew what the word "tort" meant. No one raised a hand.

Everyone understood when he and co-representative of the coalition, John Shirvinski, said "lawsuit abuse" reform, and started discussing some example of frivolous lawsuits:

- A woman suing a township because they didn't inspect paper bags at a liquor store, after a bottle of liquor she purchased from a store tore through a bag and smashed on a sidewalk.

- A woman suing a private landowner because, when she drove the car onto the private property at high speed, the automobile hit speed bumps causing a passenger's face to hit the windshield.

They also discussed the ability to pay and degrees of responsibility for liability, and how those with no insurance or ability to pay for damages caused through implied or expressed contractual neglect or disregard can pass on the costs for retribution to any other party with ability to pay who has been found to be in any way liable.

Of course, there are attorneys who are ready to represent any "wronged" clients. It is their duty to serve their clients without regard to personal beliefs or opinions held about the client.

But, Wolff said, there are number of issues that the public needs to discuss about the judicial system and the effects of abuses of the system upon all daily activities.

Wolff said the coalition has drafted legislation, but it doesn't intend to seek introductory sponsorship this year.

With so few legislative session days left in the current year, with elections in the fall after session break, and with tax reform and other currently topical issues attracting political attention, Wolff said the coalition has considered it wiser to first generate discussion and awareness to the renamed, and potentially revitalized issue.

Wolff talked about the increased costs and restrictions placed on all because of the need to protect businesses and personal fortunes from ridiculous lawsuits filed in an attempt to take money.

Wolff referred to an incident regarding a piece of equipment manufactured many, many years ago, still being used.

He said that an accident occurred and the manufacturer was found liable, for a product that was manufactured long before such

machinery was required to have all the protective devices currently mandated to protect people from themselves.

Furthermore, the piece of machinery had changed ownership many times since being manufactured.

The manufacturer had no control over the use of the machine, much less any authority to demand that current owners stop using it, or retrofit it for safety.

Rhetorically, Wolff asked the audience if that was fair to the manufacturer.

He said that the draft proposal the coalition has now would set a 15-year useful life on equipment, for liability.

The coalition seeks to promote the discussion and possible creation of changes to the justice system that would effectively create a screening system for lawsuits filed, to winnow out the frivolous.

The idea is to set up a preview system that can identify potential frivolous lawsuits early and kick them back to the petitioners or deny them.

The goal is to dispose of the frivolous before they end up costing defendants and local courts all the

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time and costs needed to hear and defend against such suits.

The problem in a nutshell is this: whether a frivolous lawsuit is successfully defended or not, the burden upon the government, taxpayers and the individuals involved in

defense against frivolousness is great in terms of time and money.

Wolff said a farmer could hardly afford to give up the time and money defending himself and his operation from a frivolous lawsuit that ends up being dismissed or

successfully defended.

But it can happen, and, depending on the labor and management value of the farmer to his operations, could well mean the loss of a timely planting of a crop, which translates into lost production, and



State Rep. Sheila Miller presents a Grange Day proclamation to Pa. State Grange Master William Steel, while the presentation is applauded by state Sen. Noah Wenger, seated on the left, and Grange Legislative Director Brenda Shambaugh, seated on the right.

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