

Bolster the bench

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California's courts cannot simply post a "no vacancy" sign because judges' court calendars are already full. So the Legislature should support Gov. Schwarzenegger's plans to add 100 new judges over the next two years.

The governor's budget proposal released Wednesday allocates \$27.8 million in 2007-08 and \$74.3 million in 2008-09 to pay for the new judges. The proposal builds on the 50 new judgeships the Legislature approved and funded last year.

Money is not the only hurdle. The Legislature also has to authorize creating the new positions -- a responsibility that political differences in the Legislature nearly sabotaged last year.

But adding judges should not be a partisan issue. Without more judicial positions, California's court system will be hard-pressed to provide timely access to justice.

The shortage of judges is particularly acute in the Inland courts, where the number of judges has not kept pace with the area's rapid growth. Inland judges face some of the heaviest caseloads in the state. The state Judicial Council, which oversees the court system, recommends that 27 of the 100 new positions go to Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

The lack of sufficient judges can hinder the functioning and quality of the state's court system. The Legislature has the power -- and duty -- to safeguard California justice.

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