

Calif. chief justice wants fee to secure courts

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SACRAMENTO—Citing a recent attack on a Stockton judge, California's chief justice urged lawmakers on Tuesday to approve a \$7 increase in court fees to maintain courthouse security.

Chief Justice Ronald George told a joint session of the state Senate and Assembly that courts do not have the money to implement security standards agreed upon by court officials and county sheriffs.

He mentioned the incident last week in which a murder trial defendant attacked a Stockton judge with a six-inch metal blade before being shot to death by a police detective. San Joaquin County Superior Court Judge Cinda Fox has since returned to work.

"Courthouses should be sanctuaries for the peaceful resolution of disputes—not crime scenes or potential battlefields," George said in his annual State of the Judiciary address.

He also urged lawmakers to find the money to fill 100 new judgeships, saying the additional judges are needed to ease a growing backlog of criminal and civil cases.

Courts are "keenly aware" of the state's budget problems and are taking steps to hold down costs by implementing voluntary employee furloughs, keeping vacant positions open and reducing the number of hours they are open, among other steps, George said.

But case logjams are developing in several areas of the state, he added.

"The gap between population and caseload growth and the number judges continues to widen," George said. "Increases in judicial positions to match those workload increases have lagged for decades."

George did not mention the most high-profile case pending before the court, the challenge to Proposition 8's ban on gay marriage. But he told reporters afterward that he was glad last Thursday's hearing on the case was televised.

Televising court hearings on major issues such as gay marriage is a "giant civics lesson," he said.

"It makes people better understand and appreciate the ultimate decision of the court in any area," he said. "Whether they agree with it or not, at least they don't just get the bottom line of who won and who lost. They see what goes into the process."

George said the court's decision in the Proposition 8 case could make it tougher for its justices to win retention elections because it will upset people on one side of the gay marriage issue. But he also said he doesn't worry about that sort of thing.

"You've got to hang up your robe if you have to worry about looking over your shoulder," he added.

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