

Court bond worthy of passage

Money would improve essential parts of the local justice system.

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Add California's courthouses to the long list of infrastructure needs the state faces. Many courts, including those in Fresno County, are inadequate for the needs of the public, juries, witnesses, judges and other court personnel. A bond measure now pending in the Legislature may be at least part of the answer.

Senate Bill 1407, by Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, would raise fines paid by convicted criminals to renovate existing courthouses and build new ones around the state. Some of that money could be spent here, to fix up the existing courthouse in downtown Fresno and build new satellite courtrooms in Clovis and Selma, three of the projects that would be on the top-priority list statewide if the measure is passed. All three projects meet the bill's criteria for inclusion in the highest-priority category for funding.

The main courthouse is a mess, as anyone who's been there recently can attest. The building is overcrowded and presents security problems for the public, judges, court employees and prisoners. It's also in need of a seismic retrofit.

A new regional courthouse in Selma, with six or seven courtrooms, would replace part-time courtrooms in Selma, Coalinga, Fowler, Kerman, Kingsburg, Reedley and Sanger. The existing courtrooms would be replaced by "service centers" in those cities.

A new one-room courthouse would be built in Clovis to replace the existing -- and inadequate -- facility, to serve the growing needs of that area.

Funds are already in place for the renovation of the B.F. Sisk Courthouse, the former federal building that was turned over to the county when the new federal courthouse opened in downtown Fresno. That project is on track to be completed by the winter of 2010. Additionally, construction of the new Juvenile Delinquency Courthouse is proceeding.

The Perata bill to fund all the needed courthouse projects around the state is not perfect. Fines in civil cases are usually paid, but critics correctly point out that in many instances, fines levied in criminal cases are never paid. Those convicted are often unable to pay and frequently choose jail time over fines.

But in the current climate of state finances, this may be the best we can get. The courts are an essential part of the justice system, every bit as important as police, sheriff's deputies, prosecutors and defense attorneys. Any mechanism we can find to improve the physical conditions of courthouses will be welcome.

SB 1407 bill is a revenue bond, which means it doesn't go to the voters for approval, but must garner two-thirds majorities in each chamber of the Legislature. It passed the Senate in late May, and its next stop is in the Assembly Appropriations Committee on Aug. 7, after which it would go to the full Assembly for a final vote. We urge its final passage and signing by the governor.

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