

# Los Angeles Times

## Fund California's courts

**A bill that uses a responsible formula to upgrade the state's courts deserves support.**

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The judicial branch of government needs money too -- to rebuild crumbling courthouses, to ensure jurors' security and comfort, and to keep justice available to Californians accused of crimes or seeking to make their case in civil court. How about issuing \$5 billion in bonds that future generations will pay off with their tax dollars? Forget it. We've been down that road too many times already. But the courts have a better idea, and Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata (D-Oakland) is carrying it in a worthy bill. It deserves to pass.

[Senate Bill 1407](#) provides for lease revenue bonds to finance the repair, retrofit and construction of courthouses across the state. Hikes in criminal penalties and civil fees would pay for the courts to purchase property and begin designing projects.

The Times has three concerns, and the courts have satisfied 2 1/2 of them. First, we have long frowned on piecemeal taxes and fees to fund unrelated expenses. But court fines and fees are directly related to use of the courts, and these increases are the best way to make needed upgrades. As it is, in far too many courthouses, handcuffed suspects in jail jumpsuits are walked through public corridors where they can confront jurors or witnesses. Population booms in Southern California, especially in the Inland Empire, have brought with them enormous court caseloads and no place suitable to conduct trials. A new \$35 penalty on infractions, \$30 on misdemeanor and felony convictions, and a doubling of some base fines would keep these payments up to date with inflation and pay for construction of safe and secure courthouses.

Second, higher fees can block a Californian's access to justice. In probate, some filing fees will quintuple. But the required payments are not out of line, and litigants and accused criminals unable to pay part or all of the amounts are entitled to waivers. The status quo also limits access, forcing many to travel to distant, undersized courthouses built half a century ago to serve a much smaller population.

The bill mandates a full public accounting of the courts' use of the funds, and the judicial branch has slowly improved access to budget information, which for too long was inexplicably withheld from public view or supposedly too complex to assemble on demand. Here's where we still have some reservations, not with the bill but with the courts' still-too-mysterious budget. The judicial branch may find that the more accessible it makes its financial data, down to every salary and purchase and payment, the more quickly Californians will support its requests.

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