

SFGate.com**Courthouse closures must end, chief jurist says**

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California's chief justice told lawmakers Tuesday that shutting down courthouses one day a month should no longer be considered an option for helping the state close its budget deficit.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald George said lawmakers instead should consider extending a user fee paid by defendants. It is projected to raise \$40 million for court-related security through June 30, 2011.

State courts have been closed the third Wednesday of each month since September to partially absorb a \$380 million cut to their budgets. The cut did not include \$65 million in unfunded costs.

"We have a lot of complaints from jurors who have a Wednesday break. We have longer lines on days preceding and following court closure day. Cases take longer," George said in an interview after his annual State of the Judiciary address to a joint session of the Legislature.

The closures of 532 courthouses and furloughs of more than 20,000 staff members, which are scheduled to last until July, are projected to save about \$63.3 million.

The cutbacks have made the court system "hard-pressed to provide accessible justice," he told lawmakers.

Courts have instituted hiring freezes and eliminated positions, and the California Supreme Court last month closed its clerk's office in Los Angeles.

George told lawmakers that the court closures are a symbol of the severity of California's economic crisis.

"These statewide closures must not continue into the next fiscal year."

Between 80 percent and 90 percent of the state's 1,700 judges also have voluntarily cut their pay by 4.6 percent, George said.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in January proposed restoring \$100 million to the courts as part of

his budget proposal, but George characterized that funding as uncertain. Much of the money would materialize only if the federal government gives states extra money to help balance their budgets.

The governor also assumes lawmakers will endorse his proposal to retrofit cameras on city and county traffic lights as a way to catch drivers who speed through intersections. A share of the speeding fines would help pay to improve court security.

Instead, George said, the court system needs a stable source of annual funding.

George urged lawmakers not to use fees earmarked to build or renovate 41 courthouses to help run the country's largest court system, as some judges have advocated. Those construction projects are estimated to create 105,000 jobs, George said.

"This homegrown stimulus package affects more than just the judicial branch," George said. "It could not have come at a better time for the California construction industry and the men and women employed in the building trades."

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