

Chief Justice Calls for More Judges

By Jason W. Armstrong

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RIVERSIDE - San Bernardino and Riverside counties are the "poster children" for regions that have too few judges to keep up with explosive population growth, Chief Justice Ronald M. George said Friday.

Over the past decade, George said, both counties have had "a 50 percent increase in population but only a 10 percent increase in judges."

Riverside, which has 49 judges, and San Bernardino, which has 63, are "way at the top of the list for new jurists," he said.

Both counties have added 100,000 residents annually for the past several years. Each now has 2 million residents.

"These counties are poster children for how the number of judges can fall behind needs of incredible growth," George said.

The chief justice spoke to 200 judges and attorneys at a luncheon at Riverside's historic Mission Inn.

George predicted Riverside and San Bernardino could see relief by next year.

Pending legislation would provide for 150 new jurists statewide over the next three years, he said. San Bernardino would get 23 additional judges - the most of any county.

Riverside would get the second most, with 19 new jurists.

On Tuesday, the state Senate Judiciary Committee approved the \$36 million measure, called SB56.

State Sen. Joe Dunn, D-Santa Ana, is backing the bill. It has to go before the state Senate Appropriations Committee, then to a vote on the state Senate floor later this year.

George urged judges and lawyers Friday to keep pressuring lawmakers to support the bill "so it doesn't fall to the wayside."

"We have to tell graphic stories ... about what the lack of judges means for your counties," he said.

In a drastic move, Riverside court officials last summer closed all the civil trial courtrooms to deal with the shortage. The civil judges heard only criminal matters for two weeks to help get a handle on an unprecedented criminal-trial logjam.

Some civil lawyers criticized the move, saying it unreasonably postponed their cases and inconvenienced clients and witnesses who had been scheduled to testify.

Attorneys say the shortage has caused justice to suffer in San Bernardino County, where judges each handle 6,800 matters annually. That's well above the statewide average of 4,000 cases per year per judge, according to the Judicial Council.

"Quite candidly, justice delayed is justice denied," Wilfred Schneider, president of the San Bernardino County Bar Association, said before George's talk.

"Judges in this county don't have a lot of time to spend on each trial," Schneider said. "My concern is that some people who can't afford counsel might get tongue-tied in court and get short shrift because cases have to be moved so quickly through the system."

George also said courts are laboring in shoddy facilities statewide.

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Responsibility of trial court facilities shifted from counties to the state last year.

George said one of the top items on his legislative wish list is money for new courthouses.

He said state court officials hope to secure a \$6 billion bond for new courthouse construction by 2007.

George has said that San Bernardino's downtown courthouse ranks among the worst of the state. Seismic studies have shown that the 79-year-old, four-story building could collapse "in pancake fashion" in an earthquake greater than 6.5.

George said courts in other counties, such as Tulare, have mold problems.

"We desperately need places that are safe for people," he said.

The chief justice said dilapidated courthouses are affecting court security. During a visit to a Los Angeles court several years ago, George recalled, he almost slipped in a pool of blood while stepping off an elevator.

"It was a family law [litigant] who had shot his wife to death," he said.

Among other things, George said he's pushing for legislation to elevate more commissioners to judges.

He said 30 percent of Riverside's bench officers are commissioners, some of whom are hearing complex cases more suited for judges.

Commissioners "should be treated as judges" if they're going to do judges' work, George said. Riverside Superior Court Presiding Judge Sharon Waters said she's pleased with George's efforts to improve justice statewide.

"He cares and is concerned about each and every court in the state," Waters said. "[He] works constantly to ensure that each court has the resources it needs to meet its constitutional duties."

The Riverside and San Bernardino bar associations and the Riverside Legal Professionals Association sponsored George's talk.

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