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Budget Deal Would Bring More Judges, Higher Pay

By KENNETH OFGANG, Staff Writer

Approval of Monday's legislative budget deal would mean 150 new judgeships across the state and an 8.5 percent pay raise for judges, those familiar with the agreement said yesterday.

Michael Belote, the California Judges Association's Sacramento lobbyist, said he was "really gratified by the commitment of the governor and the legislative leadership and all the hard work of the chief justice" on the judiciary's longstanding budget priorities.

Details were still emerging yesterday regarding the agreement reached Monday by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Democratic and Republican legislative leadership, and votes were expected to occur last night.

The pay raise would kick in Jan. 1. Judges currently receive automatic increases on July 1 of each year, under a formula tied to the salaries of rank-and-file state employees.

The amount of this year's automatic raise is still undetermined because the state is still negotiating with some of its employee unions, Belote explained, but will ultimately be something more than 1 percent.

The 8.5 percent raise, which will bring trial judges' salaries to more than \$160,000, fulfills a long delayed promise going back to the administration of former Gov. Gray Davis. The Legislature back then granted an 8.5 percent raise, with an additional increase of equal size expected to pass in 2001, but that was dropped—or "deferred" as Chief Justice Ronald M. George said at the time—due to a state budget crisis.

Belote praised Kate Howard, the new lobbyist for the Judicial Council, as well as the chief justice for persuading the legislative leadership to make the increase part of the 2006-2007 budget.

As for the additional judges, Jim Evans, a spokesman for Sen. Joseph Dunn, D-Garden Grove, said it was his preliminary

understanding that there would be funds to create 50 new judgeships each year for three years, and that the Judicial Council will be responsible for allocating the positions among the counties.

Those provisions were included in SB 56, a bill by Dunn that has been moribund since last summer because there were no funds to pay for the positions.

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