

California's top judge pleads for judiciary funds

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Published 12:00 am PDT Wednesday, March 26, 2008

As California struggles with a multibillion-dollar deficit, the lead judge of the nation's largest state court system pleaded his case at the Capitol on Tuesday for funds to pay for new courthouses, improved security and more judges.

California Supreme Court Chief Justice Ronald George, in his 13th annual State of the Judiciary address, acknowledged the current budget strain and said he was not asking for "sweeping new initiatives." But he stressed the need for resources "essential to the very integrity of the justice system."

"The failure to provide sufficient resources and personnel for the court system risks depriving California of an effective public civil justice system," George said. "I believe we all agree that a functional court system is not a luxury – it is an essential component of state government."

George told the joint session of lawmakers that the judiciary has introduced and supported programs, such as services to help individuals representing themselves in court or the availability of interpreters, without the help of legislative funding.

But the judiciary has reached a point where support is vital to ensure safety and the smooth operation of the courts, which, as George pointed out, often set precedents for the country.

Unlike other addresses in recent years, George's State of the Judiciary arrived as the state is facing a budget shortfall of at least \$8 billion. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed across-the-board cuts of 10 percent to most state agencies and is looking to cut up to \$245 million from the judicial branch.

That means that no new judges will arrive this year to any bench in California, including the six that were scheduled to arrive in Sacramento County, which handles one of the largest caseloads in the state.

"We were desperate before, and this is simply going to make the desperation put over for another year," Sacramento Presiding Court Judge James Mize said before the session. "The courts that need the most will be suffering the most by this delay."

In his address, George said California ranks at the bottom of comparable states in the number of judges on the bench in proportion to the state's population.

The Central Valley and the Inland Empire are particularly affected, he said, pointing out that Riverside – for the second year in a row – had to close down its civil courtrooms and use those judges to handle criminal cases.

Mize said Sacramento County has resorted to similar practices, creating up to a yearlong backlog now in the civil courts.

Courthouse security was another prominent theme of George's speech, coupled with his renewed call for new courthouse construction and renovations of current buildings.

A proposed bond measure that had been discussed last year for placement on the November ballot has taken a new form in Senate Bill 1407, sponsored by Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata.

The pending bill seeks \$5 billion in revenue bonds to support upgrades and construction.

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