

Contra Costa Superior Court announces deep cuts, court closures in closing budget gap

By Robert Rogers *Contra Costa Times San Jose Mercury News*

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MARTINEZ -- Contra Costa Superior Court is set for a drastic downsizing and consolidation that law enforcement and other leaders think will cause painful reductions in services.

The court on Friday announced a 2012-13 budget that cuts \$7 million from last year's operating budget, leaving it with a \$51 million spending plan. The state also has taken away \$8 million of local reserves to balance the state budget.

Among the effects will be the closure of six courtrooms, with the operations of one other courtroom reduced to four days per week.

The closures are mostly to east and west county locations, further consolidating court business in Martinez, meaning farther commutes for residents who live on the county's outskirts.

The courtrooms slated for closure include the juvenile law courtrooms in Pittsburg and Richmond, with cases reassigned to Martinez, and the Concord courthouse, with its traffic cases transferred to the Walnut Creek court.

The family law courtroom in Pittsburg will be shut down, with caseloads transferred to Martinez.

One as-yet-unnamed civil trial department will be closed, and the civil discovery/ex parte courtroom in Martinez will be shut down as well, according to the news release.

All the closures are set for the end of the year, with the exception of the family law courtroom in Pittsburg, which is slated for an Oct. 22 closure.

In Richmond, where juveniles and their families can currently go to the local courthouse, the news was met with dismay.

"This will create a tremendous hardship for families who must rely on hours of public transit to get to Martinez," said the Rev. Andre Shumake, a Richmond anti-violence activist. "Families will be forced to miss court and then victimized by adverse decisions made against them."

Richmond police Chief Chris Magnus said his department's efforts to combat truancy among school-age children has been successful in reducing crime and getting youths on a positive path in large part because of its partnership with the Richmond juvenile court.

"While we share the court's frustration with the state budget reductions that have led to these local cuts, we are profoundly disappointed with the decision to close the juvenile court in Richmond that serves West County," Magnus said in an email Friday. "This will completely unravel our highly successful Daytime Curfew truancy reduction program and absolutely cause juvenile crime to increase in our region. The net result is simply a shifting of costs."

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia, of Richmond, said the cuts were lamentable.

"While I understand the tremendous financial pressure that the courts are under, these cuts will make it harder for West and East County residents to have full access to justice in our county," Gioia said.

The retrenchment reduces courtrooms countywide from 46 to 40, meaning further delays in a system that processes about 170,000 cases per year.

"These cuts to courts in Richmond and Pittsburg will not equate to savings, they will set new costs in motion,"

county Supervisor Federal Glover, of Pittsburg, said. "This will create costly lasting impacts."

The cuts reflect continuing strains on the state budget, which faces a \$15.7 billion shortfall.

Proposition 30, put forth by Gov. Jerry Brown, would use temporary sales taxes and income taxes on high-earners to avert deeper cuts. Polls show the measure hovering around 50 percent support ahead of the November election. Opponents dismiss the measure as a tax hike without fundamental spending reform.

Court leaders said the facilities could reopen in a better fiscal environment.

"We look forward to restoring these services as soon as the state allots sufficient money to the judicial branch that we may do so," said Judge Diana Becton, according to the news release.

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