

✓ C.F. COURTS RP 9/22/90 P.1

County considers closing Watsonville court

By SUSANNA HECKMAN
STAFF WRITER

The closure of Watsonville Municipal Court may be considered as a way to cut Santa Cruz County's criminal justice budget, Municipal Court Judge Richard McAdams said yesterday.

That would leave the county with four municipal courtrooms, all in Santa Cruz.

"The judges feel it's a tragedy to even consider closing the court in

Watsonville," McAdams said. "It would present a tremendous hardship to the community and also place a severe personnel and financial burden on the (Watsonville) police department."

McAdams said that in spite of their strong feelings, the judges realize that other county departments may be facing cuts that are just as dramatic, or maybe more so.

The county administrative of-

ficer, Susan Mauriello, has asked each department to respond to specific questions about alternate ways of cutting their budgets.

State budget negotiators cut state funds to the county drastically this year, Mauriello said. County supervisors are facing a budget deficit of \$5.6 million this fiscal year and of more than \$11.6 million next year, she said.

The trial court budget faces a deficit of \$421,350 this year, she

said. Mauriello said her staff will present several different budget-trimming plans to the Board of Supervisors at hearings scheduled for Thursday and Friday.

McAdams said he and the four other municipal court judges were asked to respond to "three or four different scenarios" about ways to consolidate judicial services. All of the scenarios included closing the Watsonville court, he said.

"The criminal justice department is unique in that we can't cut services," McAdams said. "We don't have the option of sending cases away — we have to handle them all the way through, whether they're traffic, small claims, or a murder case."

That is why the questions from the CAO focused on consolidation, he said.

Another possible cutback would be closing the clerical office to the

public in the afternoons. The people who form long lines at the clerks' windows at Watsonville's Municipal Court every afternoon — waiting to ask questions, get court dates or pay fines — would have to go to Santa Cruz in the morning.

That's another option the judges do not approve of, McAdams said.

"Municipal court has always

See COURT page 11 ►

✓ C.F. RP 9/22/90 P.11

COURT

► From Page 1

been considered the people's court, even before Judge Wapner," McAdams said. "The judges have always felt it's critical to be open to the public all the time."

Closing the court would be expensive for the Watsonville Police Department, McAdams said, as officers would have to travel constantly to Santa Cruz to get search warrants, testify, bring information to the district attorney and the like.

It would also add a new expense to the county, McAdams said, as there's no room for Heather Morse, the Watsonville Municipal Court judge, in Santa Cruz.

"We're in trailers as it is," McAdams said.

McAdams said that as soon as the judges had responded to the CAO's questions in writing, he notified Watsonville Mayor Todd McFarren and Police Chief Terry Medina that the idea may be considered and that the judges had expressed their disapproval.

"The community should be extremely concerned about the closing of a court — and the danger the county government has of collapsing," McAdams said.

"The judges don't feel we're in a battle with the county supervisors or the CAO. The state and federal governments have drastically cut funds, and we on the local level are having to make the hard decisions," he said.

Mauriello said that one of the other considerations before the board of supervisors will be raising revenue by exercising the new taxing authority the state has given it.

She said the legislature and the governor approved changes in the law that allow the county to charge cities in its borders for the administrative costs of doing their property tax collection, and for booking people into county jail.

The county also has new authority to charge residents in unincorporated areas a utility tax, and to assess a business license fee in the unincorporated areas as well, she said.