

City opposes moving felony court cases

Officials fear impact of court realignment plan

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STAFF WRITER

A tentative court-realignment plan that would take all felony cases out of Watsonville Municipal Court has raised concern among Watsonville city officials.

The plan to move all felonies in the county to Santa Cruz courts would cost the city money in police payroll costs, and make it more difficult for defendants, witnesses and victims to get to court, City Manager Steve Salomon said this morning.

"We're a lower-income community, compared to the rest of the county," Salomon said. "People have less access to vehicles."

Officers are often called to tes-

sending them to Santa Cruz involves substantially more time away from the beat.

The court realignment, designed to reduce the number of trials, would assign three judges to handle virtually all felonies in the county. It's scheduled to start June 1.

Instead of the current system where a felony goes to Municipal Court for arraignment and preliminary hearing, then to Superior Court for trial, all steps in such cases will be handled by the same judge.

It's known in legal circles as "vertical prosecution," with the same judge, prosecutor and defense attorneys. Three judges will

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handle felonies: Sam Stevens from Superior Court, and Rob Atack and Heather Morse from Municipal Court, who will be acting as Superior Court judges.

Morse, judge for Watsonville Municipal Court since 1989, said the realignment would improve court efficiency, but she also expressed Salomon's concerns about the impact moving the felonies out of Watsonville would have on the community.

Judges will discuss realignment tomorrow, and the issue will go to the county's Criminal Justice Council April 15.

This is the second proposal in three years for cutting back the Watsonville court. In 1990, the county administration proposed closing the court as a cost-saving measure.

That brought a wave of protests from judges and others in the criminal-justice system, and the administration backed off.

Tom Black, presiding judge for Superior Court, said similar realignments have been tried in Marin and San Luis Obispo counties, and trials have been reduced. "When all the parties involved know each other, they'll end up resolving a lot of cases," he said. He and Morse emphasized that the realignment plan is not final, and more meetings are planned.

Defense and prosecuting attorneys aren't as enthusiastic about the new system as the court administration.

"It's no panacea," said Jon Hopkins, chief deputy district attorney.

The new system will work only if there's a commitment by judge and attorneys on both sides, he said.

That means attorneys won't drag a case out in hopes of getting a better deal, and judges will be consistent on plea bargains.

Ben Rice, past president of the Santa Cruz County Criminal Defense Attorneys Association, said lawyers are taking a "wait-and-see attitude" about the new system.

Rice said he has no choice but to give the new system a chance, but said he's not optimistic. He said he wouldn't be surprised to see attorneys push for change after the system has been in effect for six months.