

# Expanded court sought

Courts

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**■ Watsonville:** City leaders say residents often have to travel too far to face a judge, causing a hardship.

BY TERRI MORGAN  
Special to the Mercury News

Watsonville couples can get married at the Santa Cruz County Superior Court annex on Freedom Boulevard — just two miles from downtown. But if it doesn't work out, they face a 20-mile trip to Santa Cruz to legally end it.

With just a single courtroom and one hearing room in Watsonville for all of the south county, residents involved in everything from divorces to felonies and domestic violence

have to travel to the county seat to face a judge.

It's a situation Watsonville leaders say puts a hardship on local residents involved in court cases and one that costs the police department nearly \$70,000 in overtime last year.

City leaders, noting there are 14 courtrooms in Santa Cruz, are establishing a task force to press their case for expanded court facilities in south county — downtown, not on the city's outskirts.

"Watsonville's court does not

have full services like north county," said City Councilwoman Betty Bobeda. "We want, in south county, the same court they have in Santa Cruz County Superior Court."

The city's move is particularly timely. A state task force is expected in Santa Cruz in late July, as part of statewide assessment of local services and facilities. Until 1998, superior courts were run by the counties in which they were located. Now, they are run by the state superior court system.

"Our fear is that the state could potentially close down Watsonville's courthouse," said Councilman Rafael Lopez. "Rather than react, we want to be proactive."

Matters heard in the county Super-

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rior Court's Watsonville annex are limited largely to traffic violations, misdemeanors, small claims and some civil matters.

Some proceedings take place just once a week. Weddings are held Wednesday afternoons, community juvenile court on Friday afternoons, and family law matters on Thursday

mornings. Other issues are allotted even less time. Truancy mediation cases, for example, are heard only on the last Friday of each month, and family support matters the second Thursday of each month.

Most other cases are handled at the main court facility on Ocean Street in Santa Cruz, with the exception of juveniles charged with felonies. Those are heard at the Juvenile Court on Graham Hill Road in Felton, a location difficult enough to reach that some low-income parents have been unable to attend their child's trial, say city officials.

"You can't even get a bus from Watsonville to the Juvenile Court in Felton," said Lopez.

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## Watsonville pushes for own court facility

**■ COURT**  
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"It's about time families, if they have juveniles in the system, should be able to make their court appearances," said Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina. "The court facility in Felton is extremely hard for a lot of parents to make a court appearance."

Statistics are not available to indicate what percentage of cases heard in Santa Cruz courts involved Watsonville residents. But the number of felony arrests in Watsonville gives some indication of the volume of cases.

Nearly all persons arrested are arraigned in court before being released — even when charges are later dropped. In 1999, Watsonville police arrested 507 adults and 133 juveniles on felony charges. In 1998, it was 545 adults and 165 juveniles. Information on how many of those arrests resulted in felony indictments was unavailable.

**'A great inconvenience'**

"It's a great inconvenience for Watsonville residents," said Councilman Chuck Carter, who spent three decades on the Watsonville police force before retiring in 1996. "People would be released in Santa Cruz; poor people without transportation to Watsonville."

Not only does the distance create a hardship for the subjects of court cases but those involved in them.

Not all arrests result in a court trial, as charges may be dropped or a suspect can accept a plea bargain. Cases that do go to trial, however, can require multiple court appearances for the accused, arresting officers, victims and witnesses — not to mention family members and friends who may want to attend.

Carter recalls it was sometimes

**FELONY ARRESTS**

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Year	County*	Watsonville	% of county total**
1998	9,503	2,181	23
1997	11,567	2,703	23
1996	12,544	2,480	20
1995	13,141	2,833	22
1994	14,035	2,762	20

\* Cities of Scotts Valley, Capitola, Santa Cruz, Watsonville and unincorporated areas of the county.  
\*\* Percentages are rounded up.

Source: Santa Cruz County Community Assessment Project

so difficult for witnesses without transportation to get to and from court that he occasionally gave them rides. And occasionally, he said, cases were lost because prosecutors couldn't get south county witnesses to court.

The extra travel time to courtrooms in Santa Cruz also is a major inconvenience for the city's police force, particularly when added to normal court delays, said Santa Cruz County Supervisor Tony Campos, who represents the Pajaro Valley.

A former Watsonville councilman, Campos said officers testifying at the Freedom Boulevard annex can go back to work during delays, but that's not possible when they're in Santa Cruz.

"Sometimes they'll sit down there for nine hours," said Campos, who has been spearheading the drive for expanded court services in Watsonville.

Medina estimates two to three officers are taken away each week, two to six hours at a time, to attend court proceedings in Santa Cruz. In 1999, such travel cost the department about \$67,000 for more than 1,900 overtime hours.

"People don't understand how

much more accessible courts will become if we're able to mirror those services here," Medina said, adding that it would also ease pressures on court facilities in Santa Cruz.

Council members Bobeda and Lopez, who want to serve on the task force, hope it will be ready to begin meeting within the next two weeks.

The committee would include representatives from the city council, Santa Cruz County district attorney and administrative offices, city and county law enforcement officials and community members.

**Want annex moved**

In addition to seeking expanded court services, city leaders hope to persuade state officials to move the south county court annex from Freedom Boulevard to a more accessible location in downtown Watsonville, preferably across the street from City Hall on Main Street.

They also hope to persuade state officials to hire additional staff members who can translate court proceedings and legal matters to Spanish-speaking residents.

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