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Proposal to close courthouse attacked

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Watsonville officials are concerned and angry that county officials are even considering closing the Municipal Courthouse Annex on Freedom Boulevard.

In an attempt to make up a budget shortfall of \$5.6 million — due in large part to state budget cuts — County Administrative Officer Susan Mauriello has asked each county department to respond to different budget-cutting plans. Municipal court judges were asked for their opinions on a couple of different ways the municipal court budget could be cut. All of the proposals included closing the Watsonville court.

Watsonville Police Chief Terry Medina said the first the city heard about the idea was Friday, when Municipal Court Judge Richard McAdams called him to let him know that it was being dis-

cussed "before he read it in the papers."

Medina said he wished that representatives of the city and criminal justice system could have met and tried to work out an agreeable solution when the idea was first being tossed around.

Medina said the county's need to balance the budget was understandable, but that it shouldn't be done "on the backs of the people of Watsonville."

Watsonville Municipal Court Judge Heather Morse, who was on vacation last week, but at her home, said she wasn't told about the possible closure and didn't find out about it until she came in to work yesterday and read about it in the paper.

Morse said that the four judges who reviewed the scenarios last week protested the closure, but

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conceded that it was necessary in order to balance the budget.

Morse said she's against closing the court "at any cost." She said she thinks the budget could be balanced in other ways, including cutting back on two supervisorial positions in the Santa Cruz courts, and through worker attrition as record-keeping becomes automated.

"I am opposed to it at any cost, because I think it would seriously affect the citizens of Watsonville on a number of levels," she said.

Losing the court would deny access to the court system to people in lower-income brackets and to monolingual Spanish speakers, who would have to take more time off work to go to Santa Cruz on the bus, she said.

Morse said closing the court would put an additional burden on the criminal justice system. There would be more "no-shows" she said, which would result in more warrants being issued and more people being jailed in the already-overcrowded County Jail. She also said it would have an adverse impact on the law enforcement and criminal justice system presence in South County and that would

affect victims as well as defendants.

For example, she said, in the face of increasing gang problems, she thinks it's important that gang-related cases come into a court that is familiar with the local situation.

Medina said there would be increased costs to the police department because of the time it would take to get to Santa Cruz to go to court or to get warrants.

Mayor Todd McFarren, who called the idea "a depressing proposition," said he would ask city staff at the council meeting tonight to draw up a report on the increased cost to the city. A closure would impact other city plans, he said, noting that there have been discussions about the possibility of having the court relocate to downtown, as recommended by the Urban Land Institute.

When asked what he thought the city could do about it, he said "I don't know. Make noise. That's what I plan to do."

The Santa Cruz courts are already overcrowded, Morse said, and a trailer would have to be purchased to accommodate her courtroom. The court building in Watsonville is already paid for, she said.

Medina said he thinks the county should consolidate one of the courts in Santa Cruz. It only makes sense to consolidate where you've got a number of courts, he said.

Correction

A fund-raising barbecue for the Democratic Central Committee of Santa Cruz County will be held Sunday, Sept. 30, from 2 to 5 p.m. at the Harvey West Park Clubhouse in Santa Cruz. The cost is \$15 for adults and \$5 for children.