

Kathleen Akao will be the county's first judge of Asian descent.



Akao appointed to bench

Courts

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The county's first woman elected to the Superior Court bench will not have to wait until January to begin handling cases. Friday, Republican Gov. Pete Wilson said that the Democrat who beat his own appointee in June can begin her duties immediately.

Kathleen Akao, 46, will also become the county's first judge of Asian descent. Her election was also the first time a sitting judge has been beaten at the polls.

"I'm very grateful the governor decided to appoint me early," Akao said. "I think it shows he's aware of the pressures on the court created when (former judge) George (Kovacevich) left early. It's going to be for the benefit of the courts and the public."

Akao hopes her parents and college-student son will be able to attend her swearing-in next Friday, but said she also plans a formal investiture in January, when her elected term officially starts.

"I'm looking forward to joining

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my colleagues on the bench," she said Friday. "... At least I'll be able to help out in the meantime."

Court administrator Christine Patton agreed that the governor's appointment is good news for a backed-up court system. Judges have been in short supply after Kovacevich resigned the \$104,000 position early to take a job elsewhere.

"We were very excited," Patton

said of the news of Wilson's action.

Akao will finish up her caseload with the County Counsel's office in the coming week, Patton said. Akao will be sworn in Friday and will take the bench Oct. 31.

For the rest of this year, Akao will handle civil and criminal trials in the Dept. 8 modular courtroom in front of the courthouse, Patton said. Akao is scheduled to move onto the felony team on Jan.

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Akao has handled civil litigation, collection actions and appellate work for the county for eight years. Before that, she was a public defender for Santa Clara County and was in private practice for three years in San Jose, specializing in criminal law, immigration, family law and probate work. She was a staff attorney for the Asian Law Alliance from 1982-85.