

^{COURTS} Judge checks into hospital; shortage on bench worsens

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SANTA CRUZ — A shortage of judges here worsened Tuesday when Superior Court Judge Donald O. May entered Dominican Hospital for tests after slight irregularities showed in his heartbeat.

May, 62, said in a phone interview this morning that "it is not a major matter," and he expects to be home within three to five days. He said he entered the hospital for the sake of convenience, rather than staying at home and spending several days at the hospital for the tests.

His absence leaves the four departments of Santa Cruz Superior Court with only one judge, Chris Cottle. Harry Brauer was elevated to the post of appellate court justice last November, and Rollie Hall retired because of heart problems earlier this year.

Several applications by local attorneys are on file with Gov. George Deukmejian. Deukmejian has sent all of those names on to the State Bar's evaluation committee, and has received several back from the bar.

He has not acted, and attorneys and other courthouse regulars here say they

don't expect a replacement until July, at the earliest, and perhaps September.

Visiting judges, supplied by the state's Judicial Council, have been plugging the gaps here on a piecemeal basis, but Cottle said this morning that the backlog is increasing more quickly each day.

One civil trial is under way before a visiting judge, and another judge has been requested.

May's absence has delayed by a week at least one murder trial. Ernest "Caspar" Vasquez, 33, was to go to trial Tuesday in connection with a Watsonville stabbing death.

Public Defender Jon Minsloff said the system is "chaos" as the local judiciary is chipped away piece by piece.

"One judge simply can't handle it all. There won't be any trials at all here, the way things are going. Judge Cottle will spend at least the morning every day just going through the routine calendar matters" — civil, probate, juvenile, family support, child welfare and criminal.

Assistant District Attorney Madeleine Boriss called it "a judicial Jericho — it's all coming tumbling down."