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Easing burdens on judges

Santa Cruz County courts economize

By Lee Quarnstrom
Mercury News Staff Writer

Trying to ease the burdens of overworked judges in Santa Cruz County, officials of the Superior and Municipal courts have consolidated some functions — far in advance of a newly adopted state law mandating cooperation between trial courts.

"We've been trying to merge some of our duties for a couple of years now," Superior Court Judge Bill Kelsay said Wednesday. "We're already handling cases for each other and we're talking about merging some staff."

"We do run pretty efficiently already, especially compared with some of the big counties like San Francisco or Los Angeles or Alameda," agreed Paul Ahern, administrator and clerk of the Municipal Court.

To share law libraries

Relatively simple consolidation of receptionists and law libraries for judges in the Superior and Municipal courts will occur before too long, Kelsay said.

But a major step, he said, has been the role Superior Court judges have been playing in cases traditionally assigned to Municipal Court, and vice versa.

For instance, Kelsay said, he has been involved in felony cases, which would eventually reach him after Municipal Court, before they enter Municipal Court for preliminary hearings.

Kelsay said judges have been arranging plea bargains before preliminary hearings in Municipal Court, saving time and money in both courts.

Review increases plea bargains

"This Superior Court review of our cases can frequently settle the matter quickly and easily," said Presiding Judge Tom Kelly of the Municipal Court. "Judge Kelsay or another Superior Court judge will look at the case and indicate what his sentence would be if the defendant were to be found guilty of a felony. Defense lawyers take this back to clients and frequently cases are settled immediately."

Judges are saving time and money by trying to dispose of cases before they go to preliminary hearings and, generally, trial, agreed Christine Patton, administrator-clerk of the Superior Court.

Patton noted that Santa Cruz County's Superior Court judges are among the busiest in the state.

While Butte County Superior Court judges had the highest number of cases apiece in 1989-'90, she said — about 1,375 each — those in Santa Cruz and Monterey counties averaged about 1,300 cases apiece that fiscal year.

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Courts streamline work

Santa Cruz County policy preceded state mandate

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"We're way ahead of the judges in the big counties in the number of cases we handle," she said.

Patton is a member of a state-wide task force charged by the California Judicial Council with making recommendations on how courts in the state can save money by merging functions. Each county, she said, must have a proposal to the judicial council by March 1.

Statewide, court costs must drop by 3 percent next year and 2 percent each of the following two years under the new law, Patton said.

Patton said the state is telling

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counties they have to merge some trial court functions.

"The Legislature," she said, "doesn't want to foot the bill for more judges, so they're trying to streamline things."

Pointing to the high number of cases per judge locally, Patton said she thinks Santa Cruz County may need more jurists — although she doesn't expect any to be authorized for five years or more.

Suggestions from legislators to streamline local judicial systems include cross-assigning judges to hear civil, criminal and other types of cases traditionally under the jurisdictions of another court.

"This," Patton said, "already happens here."