

Local lawmakers ready bills for short session

A new judge in Mason County one of early legislative bills

By Steven Gardner

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OLYMPIA — Mason County's criminal case load is high enough that the Legislature will consider sending it another judge.

A bill in each legislative chamber, sponsored by all three 35th District legislators, would add a third judge to the county's Superior Court. The bill is one of a handful Kitsap legislators have already introduced as pre-filed bills leading into the short session that officially begins Jan. 13.

State Sen. Tim Sheldon, D-Potlatch, is sponsoring the Senate bill. Democrat Kathy Haigh of Shelton is the prime sponsor in the House, with Republican Drew MacEwen of Union signing on as the co-sponsor.

"I don't think there will be any doubt that the workload justifies the need for a third judge," Sheldon said.

MacEwen is teaming up with Democratic state Sen. Christine Rolfes of Bainbridge Island on two bills. One would increase outreach efforts to veterans about services available. That bill is co-sponsored by state Rep. Larry Seaquist, D-Gig Harbor. Another would create a community forest trust account.

State Rep. Sherry Appleton, D-Poulsbo, is the prime sponsor of a bill that would reduce some drug crimes from a felony to a misdemeanor. She also filed a bill prohibiting local jurisdictions from enacting dangerous dog laws based on breeds. She said she was approached by owners of pit bulls, rottweilers and German shepherds concerned local communities were going to outlaw the dogs outright without evidence that the dogs are dangerous.

"Just because a dog is a breed doesn't mean it's a bad dog," Appleton said, "It's people who make dogs bad. There are proclivities in every breed that you have to know about when you start raising them."

In 2007 Appleton's hometown of Poulsbo considered banning pit bulls after an attack, but ultimately decided against it.

Appleton said she once owned a pit bull and that it was great with her grandchildren. "She was the best dog we ever had." She said she supports local jurisdictions enacting

laws based on dangerous dogs, but breed should not be a consideration in the discussion.

The bill to add a judge in Mason County stems from data prepared by the state court's Office of Judicial and Legislative Relations. Mellani McAleenan, associate director in the state office said the state and the county split the salary costs for judges. The state pays for all benefits and the county pays for any additional staffing or office space required. The additional judge costs the state about \$100,000 more per year, but to her knowledge the Legislature had never voted against similar requests in the past.

Sheldon, who is also a Mason County commissioner, said he was a new legislator when Mason County went from one judge to two. He said the crime rate in the county, which Sheldon believes is far higher than counties of similar size, justifies the need for another judge. "I would say, just anecdotally, we have a lot of drug crime," he said.

McAleenan said Mason County is unique because a higher percentage of its criminal cases go to trial than they do in other counties. The county also has a judicial commissioner, but they can't handle felony cases. The state's analysis shows Mason County needs 2.86 judges.

Kitsap County is among a number of counties in the state that has fewer judges than state analysis indicates it needs, though it is not far off. The state's formula shows Kitsap, which has eight judges, scores a need of 8.65. Pierce County scores 29.49 and has 22. Jefferson County's Judge Need score is 1.62 and the county has one judge. Pierce has already been authorized by the state to add two more judges. King County has been granted five it has yet to fill.

Adding a judge also requires approval at the county level. McAleenan said her office no longer pursues legislative approval unless there is a demonstrated buy-in on the local level.

Should the process go as expected, the Legislature will approve the additional judge during the short session and Mason County commissioners will follow. The governor would appoint the judge sometime in 2015, and there would be an election later in the year to elect a judge for a full term.

Sheldon said he expects the upcoming session to finish without a gas tax, and on time, within the 60 days allotted for even-numbered years.



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