

Washington Supreme Court boosts cost of traffic tickets

SEATTLE (AP) - The Washington Supreme Court is boosting the base cost of traffic tickets in the state by \$12 to help pay for a badly needed new computer system for district courts - a decision that four justices blasted as unfair to low-income residents who can least afford the fines.

Effective July 1, most traffic infractions, as well as some boating, camping and public park violations, will increase. It's the first boost since 2007, and the money will go partly to the new computer system and partly to provide legal services for poor people.

Chief Justice Barbara Madsen said in a news release Monday that raising the cost of the tickets was a tough decision, because the operations of the court system should not depend on fines and fees, which disproportionately hurt low-income people.

Nevertheless, she added: "A majority of the court believes the modest increase is reasonable, and is less than the state's fiscal growth factor would allow. We will continue to work with the Legislature and local courts to take active steps to reduce the potential harmful consequences for low-income persons who are financially unable to pay."

That answer wasn't good enough for Justices Sheryl Gordon McCloud, Steven Gonzalez, Mary Yu and Charles Johnson. McCloud wrote in her dissent that courts around the country are starved for money, and the Justice Department's recent investigation of the legal system in Ferguson, Missouri, following the police shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown last summer showed the trouble with using fines and fees to pay for basic court operations: It creates an incentive to fine people, rather than to seek justice, and "unfairness results," she said.

Most of the money collected from infractions comes not from the initial tickets but from penalties added when a payment is missed, McCloud wrote. That further hurts those least able to pay and has a disproportionate impact on minorities, she said.

The dissenters said the need for the new computer system is unquestionably critical, with district courts handling immense caseloads that include domestic violence protection orders, assaults, drunken driving cases and other criminal charges. The current system is basically obsolete, McCloud said.

"A new computer system that can properly track district court cases statewide, and that can provide access to a party's record in other cases including other prior convictions, protection orders, or prohibitions, is not a luxury - it is a necessity for public safety," McCloud noted.

That said, she concluded, "The majority's position is consistent with past practice and the national standard. But that system is broken."

Justices Susan Owens, Charles Wiggins, Mary Fairhurst and Debra Stephens joined Madsen in approving the increase, which was proposed by the state Office of Public Defense and the Judicial Information System Committee.