

Whatcom County to get fourth superior court judge

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Whatcom County will be getting a fourth superior court judge to help with the county's overworked case load thanks to a bill approved by the state House on April 17.

Senator Doug Ericksen's bill, Senate Bill 5052, allows for an additional superior court judge to be authorized for Whatcom County, provided that the county agrees to pay its portion of the expenses associated with the new judge.

"We were able to demonstrate that there was a need and we are thankful we are able to make this work," said county executive Jack Louws. "We made a concentrated effort to lobby for this."

The state and county will split the judge's salary equally, the state will pay for benefits and the county will take on any other associated expenses, including additional court staff. Louws estimated that it would probably cost the county around \$200,000 for its half of the bill.

The county has had only three judges since the 1970s, during which time its population has tripled, making it increasingly difficult for the county to process criminal trials and civil actions in timely fashion. "Court commissioners are unable to hear jury trials," Louws said. "So there's been a backup of cases in our system. Having another judge to handle criminal and civil cases with a jury should help clean up some of our backlog. We're just waiting on the governor's signature."

Because the House did not amend the bill, it will automatically take effect July 28 barring gubernatorial veto. It passed the House easily with a vote of 91-6.

"In passing Senate Bill 5052, the legislature recognized the fact that Whatcom County has been long overdue for a fourth judge, and that the county is willing to provide the resources necessary to bridge the gap," Ericksen said.

The judge cannot be seated any earlier than January 2015, and the courthouse must first undergo renovations. "A very rough estimate at this point for the work would be \$1 million," Louws said. "We don't have a courtroom to put a new judge in at this point, and we need chambers as well." The renovation will also include supporting office space as well as holding areas for defendants.

Louws said he will ask council to fund the remodeling using the real estate excise tax money on hand. "We have a few million dollar balance there," he said.

“So we have the money. We’ve already been in discussion with council for some time – they are well aware of the need and have been very supportive of this process.”