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Courts face major cuts

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The state budget plan to cut \$350 million from the judicial branch means significantly longer waits for civil trials and small claims cases, reduced service hours and priority given to criminal matters, said the administrative head of the local courts.

County officials yesterday were still crunching numbers on how the \$86 billion state budget passed Tuesday trickles down to local coffers. The courts, which are not a county department, are a little more clear and Court Executive Officer John Fitton said it's not pretty.

"The very fabric of justice as we know it is being changed. This is the very example of justice delayed is justice denied," Fitton said.

The local court already lost \$2 million in cuts and anticipates a \$3 million loss out of the \$150 million state plan included in the budget. The state previously announced a \$200 million cut. Fitton said another \$4 million is in the works for next year — a total of \$9 million.

For a court with a \$50 million annual budget, the loss is significant, he said.

The court workforce is down 25 percent and Fitton said he and other officials will do everything they can to prevent pink slips.

The state Administrative Office of the Courts is looking to see if it has any funds to soften the latest \$150 million blow but even so there will be at least \$6 million taken from the San Mateo County Superior Court, Fitton said.

As a result, the court must prioritize criminal matters with time restrictions which will place the brunt of the hits on civil matters. Small claims will take six months instead of 60 days, civil trials could take two to four years for resolution and even child custody disputes might run upward of 18 months.

The court won't have closures or furloughs unless mandated by the state but visitors should expect longer lines and shorter hours.

Although the courts will prioritize criminal cases, the cuts can have a domino effect onto other public safety departments like probation and the Sheriff's Office.

If a defendant waives his or her right to a speedy trial, for example, they may remain housed at the county jail longer and therefore contribute to overcrowding. With state prisoners still slated for return to local custody beginning in October, Sheriff Greg Munks said there will be challenges to keep up.

As with other county department heads, Munks is still trying to sort out the state budget details and how the pieces of the financial puzzle fit together. He doesn't know yet if the state is reimbursing counties for booking fees and how money for realignment will be divided between the affected departments.

"We'll know more each day but there's a lot of stuff in the plan people haven't really thought about," he said.

San Mateo County is better poised than some counties because it is already planning a new jail and officials have been meeting about the pending prison transfer, Munks said.

Having a budget in place is good because it lets local officials begin figuring out the impacts and adjust their finances. However, Carole Groom, president of the Board of Supervisors said Tuesday's plan still leaves a lot vague.

Groom wants more information on the estimated revenue particularly as that is what will hold off deeper trigger cuts.

In particular, Groom hates to see more taken from health and human services.

“It’s really painful to take another load from there. It is going to be not just hard but inhumane,” she said.

The county’s Human Services Agency doesn’t anticipate any specific trigger cuts, said spokeswoman Amanda Kim, although it is preparing for previously passed cuts that kick in Friday. Beginning July 1, she said, more than 3,000 low-income families with children will see an 8 percent reduction in monthly grants, children and family services will have a \$1.6 million decrease and \$3 million to \$4 million will be lost from the largest program to determine Medi-Cal eligibility.

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