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No Cuts for Courts Planned in California's \$179B Budget

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SACRAMENTO—Gov. Jerry Brown on Tuesday unveiled a \$179 billion state spending plan, amplifying his typical message of fiscal restraint with warnings about potential federal funding cuts on the horizon.

“The Legislature has to be very prudent this year,” said Brown, who presented an [annual budget](#) that generally maintains the status quo on general fund spending and puts more than \$1 billion into reserves. “There are too many uncertainties.”

For California’s courts, the proposal means no direct cuts but no major spending initiatives either.

The budget includes additional money for court employees’ health and retirement, \$55 million to backfill a continuing decline in fines and penalties, funds for new case management systems in nine small counties and \$5 million for previously approved increases to judges’ salaries and benefits.

Additionally, Brown proposed moving four vacant judgeships from the Bay Area to Inland Empire courts to address population growth and a rise in court filings. The governor supported the efforts last year to shift a handful of judgeships, but related budget language and legislation died in the Legislature.

The state budget did not include allocations to pay for new judgeships elsewhere in the state or financial help for a court construction fund that is [running out of money](#). The governor also chose not to add funding to compensate for cuts made to the judiciary during the recession.

“Given the uncertainties in the state’s budget in the coming fiscal year, Gov. Brown’s proposed budget for the judicial branch is prudent,” Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye said in a prepared statement. “We will continue to press for additional trial court revenue and any other necessary changes to address the vital needs of those seeking justice in the court system.”

Judicial branch officials are also scrutinizing a budget proposal that would bar judges from

suspending the driver's licenses of defendants who fail to appear in court or fail to pay a fine in traffic and certain other low-level offense cases. The governor's finance department argues there's no "strong connection" between suspending a license and persuading someone to pay a fine and that revoking driving privileges unfairly punishes the poor.

"We don't expect to lose any" money by dropping the threat of suspending drivers licenses, Finance Director Michael Cohen told reporters Tuesday, saying a growing number of fines and penalties are already going uncollected.

But the Judicial Council points to a study by the Los Angeles County Superior Court that projected the loss of a license-suspension penalty would cut its collections by about \$31 million.

The potential loss raises to \$170 million if measured across all courts, according to a 2016 memo by Judicial Council staff. The loss could prove a big hit to the judiciary, which shares the fee and penalty money with cities, counties, the state and 50 other specialized funds.

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