

Attempting to balance this year's budget, California legislators raided the courts' capital program fund of \$310 million. They borrowed another \$90 million to pad the state's general fund. And the Judicial Council redirected more than \$100 million to court operations. All together, the construction fund is down by more than \$500 million – a crippling blow to badly needed court projects throughout the state.

Now it's up to the statewide Court Facilities Working Group, which includes judges, administrators, and community leaders. They have to decide which of the 41 projects on the drawing board get funded, and which ones will be put on hold.

Lee Willoughby, Director, AOC Office of Court Construction/Management *"They all want their buildings and they all need their buildings. But the cuts are real and we're just going to have to find the best way to move forward."*

Meanwhile, under the direction of the Administrative Office of the Courts, some projects remain on schedule. They're funded by fees and fines collected over past years, authorized in 2002 by Senate Bill 1732. That includes the new building in Mono County. After breaking ground last spring, work plowed ahead in Mammoth Lakes, despite the rough, long winter. The 20,000 square foot building was officially dedicated September 23rd – coming in on time and a million dollars under budget.

They also worked through the snowy winter in Susanville, Lassen County. There'll be 3 multi-use courtrooms in the new \$39 million courthouse - altogether 42,000 square feet of space. They expect to move in in early 2012, right on schedule and under budget.

After five years of planning, folks in Calaveras County are looking forward to breaking ground just north of the current government center. The State Treasurer has just sold the lease revenue bonds needed to begin construction. The AOC and the court have a mutually productive partnership with the County. So the new courthouse will go up on this acreage, right next to a brand new jail.

Hon. Douglas Mewhinney, Calaveras Presiding Judge *"We will now actually have a physical connection with the new jail and because of that our security will be vastly improved."*

Currently, security is a huge problem; prisoners, jurors, customers, staff and judges all share the same hallways, shoulder to shoulder. The new building will have a fully enclosed tunnel connecting the jail to the basement of the courthouse. The sheriff plans to send handcuffed inmates through the tunnel without officers.

Hon. Douglas Mewhinney, Calaveras Presiding Judge *"Because they will just be directed to our elevators, and via camera and the fact that there is no other exit or entrance they believe that they can actually do it without having to use transport officers. They will then exit our elevator to then a bailiff."*

Which will be safer for everyone - and a money saver on transportation. The new courthouse will replace a termite-riddled modular unit, and the cramped 45 year old building the court currently shares with the county.

Karen Camper, Calaveras Court Program Mgr. *“They’re kind of on top of each other in the office here; it’s very limited; single file.”*

The approved design is already an award winner. There’ll be 4 courtrooms in 44,600 square feet, budgeted at \$43.5 million.

Hon. Douglas Mewhinney, Calaveras Presiding Judge *“It doesn’t look like a traditional courthouse, certainly, but we’re using a lot of natural light, it’s going to be a LEED certified silver building; it’s going to be on a knoll, it’s going to take advantage of views; I happen to think it’s a very aesthetically pleasing design.”*

Move in is scheduled for the fall of 2013.

Hugh Swift, Calaveras CEO *“I’m excited for staff and for everybody in the community to have a new court facility.”*

Bonds have also been sold to move the project ahead in San Benito County. Construction will begin soon on the new courthouse in Hollister, which will feature 3 courtrooms in more than 41,000 square feet.

The Long Beach courthouse, with its unique financial arrangement, is on a fast track. It’s a performance based public private partnership with the Judicial Branch and a consortium of private companies. There’ll be 31 courtrooms, a total of 416,000 square feet of space for court use. Completion is scheduled for the fall of 2013.

And as soon as the Judicial Council makes final decisions, there’ll be more information on a priority list for other court building projects.

I’m Leanne Kozak reporting for California Courts News.