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Courthouse repair
SAN DIEGO MAY NOT BENEFIT FROM HIKE IN FEES

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Many of California's courthouses are desperately in need of repair or replacement. Those who frequent them – from judges and attorneys to civil litigants, defendants and would-be jurors – would be hard-pressed to disagree, setting aside a few relatively new palaces of justice sprinkled around the state.

At a news conference this week, Chief Justice Ronald M. George said deteriorating courthouses have reached a crisis stage. He said some are not earthquake safe, others so crowded that judges hold hearings in parking lots and, he said, he has seen jurors in Los Angeles County forced to wait in stairwells and occasionally make way as shackled prisoners are marched by.

Mike Roddy, executive officer of the San Diego County Superior Court, said seismic safety and security are major issues here as well.

The problem, of course, is how to pay for courthouse projects as the state wrestles with a growing budget deficit.

Sen. Don Perata, D-Oakland, has introduced legislation that would lead to the issuance of $5 billion worth of bonds to address projects for at least 40 of the state's 450 court facilities. The cost of paying bond holders would be covered by new fees on those who find themselves dealing with the courts.

Parking fines would rise by $2. Those attending traffic school would pay $64 to the state, up from $24, in addition to what they pay the school itself. The cost of filing civil actions would rise by $25 to $35, depending on the type of case. And those convicted of crimes would pay an additional $40 in penalties.

Some criminal defense lawyers groups have taken formal positions against the bill, even though they acknowledge that new facilities are necessary. They argue, not unreasonably, that the construction and operation of the courts is a fundamental function of government that benefits society at large and should be funded out of general tax revenue.

In addition, they contend, the new fees would disproportionately hit poorer people less able to pay.

Court improvements should be funded from general tax revenue, but the fact is that no such revenue is available.

Given that, the notion that those who use the courts should help pay for their improvement is hardly revolutionary. From building bridges and tollways to managing professional licensing and campgrounds, revenue bonds and user fees have been employed for years.

Now, there is no guarantee that three expensive San Diego County projects – new courthouses downtown, in Vista and Chula Vista – would see a penny of the bond money. Although listed as critical by the state Judicial Council, they are ranked below the 40 most immediately needed projects.

Nonetheless, we urge the Legislature to give the bill the two-thirds approval it needs for passage and the governor to sign it so construction can begin as soon as possible.

Our advice to the public? Watch your speed, feed the parking meters and obey the law.

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