



Neglecting justice

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The Legislature will have to do better than the latest compromise budget plan if the state hopes to have an effective court system. California needs more than 350 new judges, but the Legislature can't agree to put even 50 new judgeships in the budget.

Gov. Schwarzenegger last month included \$5.5 million in his 2006-07 budget proposal to start adding 150 new judges over three years. The California Judicial Council, which oversees the state's courts, says 150 new positions is less than half the actual need, but budget realities dictated restraint.

Yet the Legislative conference committee that crafted a compromise budget earlier this month cut that number in half, approving only 25 new judges statewide with no commitment to adding more judges later.

California has many needs, certainly, but underfunding the necessary work of the courts is a false frugality. The state's court system faces an increasing caseload as the population expands, which leads to long waits for hearings, limited time for judgments and a deterioration in the quality of justice.

Inland residents especially should recognize the necessity of additional judges. State numbers show that Riverside and San Bernardino county judges have some of the highest caseloads per judge in the state, surpassed only by small, rural counties with few judges. Riverside County has halted civil trials to handle a backlog of criminal cases twice in the past two years. The Judicial Council's three-year plan asked the state to add 19 judges to Riverside County and 23 to San Bernardino County.

Such numbers should be compelling, even to legislative committees. California cannot afford to let justice in this state crumble from willful neglect.