

From MIRS:

Task Force Proposes Court Consolidation Plan

Some local judicial districts can do without a judge or two. Other local circuits could be consolidated.

But instead of recommending a blanket, one-size-fits-all proposal to pare down the state's \$1.52 billion judiciary system, a State Bar of Michigan task force recommended today legislative action on a case-by-case basis as judges retire out of the system.

The 29-member "Judicial Crossroads Task Force," chaired by retired Oakland County Judge Barry HOWARD and attorney Edward PAPPAS, recommended the creation of a new trial court council designed to give the Legislature political cover when faced with a proposal to eliminate a judgeship.

Even though the State Court Administrator has routinely recommended the elimination of judgeships in Michigan -- the Court of Appeals, they claim, can be scaled back by four, alone -- lawmakers have been reluctant to pull the trigger on court reductions.

The House and Senate in the past session did pass temporary reductions in Macomb and Oakland counties, but those vacancies return after a certain period of time.

The Trial Court Judicial Council would be charged with coming up with a new court structure for individual districts that are losing judges by attrition, which is a common occurrence since the state doesn't allow judges to run for re-election after age 70.

Currently, the state's judicial system has seven vacancies with at least another 22 coming as part of the 2012 election and 34 more in 2014.

Howard didn't have a final dollar total as to what could be saved as part of his recommendations, but did point out that a consolidated court plan in Barry County saved that district 5 to 15 percent. He also noted that for each judgeship lost, there is a potential average savings of about \$500,000 to \$300,000 to the local government and a \$175,000 savings to the state.

Supreme Court Justice Robert YOUNG Jr. praised the task force for producing a "thoughtful and detailed report that merits serious consideration."

"As the report notes, some of our state courts simply have more judges than they need to keep up with their workload," Young wrote. "Many of our courts could benefit from consolidating some functions with other courts in the same judicial circuit."

Rep. Kurt HEISE (R-Northville) and Rep. Bob CONSTAN (D-Dearborn Heights) both attended today's press conference. Former Supreme Court Justice Alton DAVIS spoke at today's event as a member of the Judicial Crossroads Task Force.

Other notable names on the task force include Supreme Court Justice Marilyn KELLY, Court of Appeals Judge Pat DONOFRIO, Richard MCLELLAN, former judge Kirk TABBEY and Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Denise Langford MORRIS.

The task force also noted today the state could save \$460,788 if all trial judges receive the same base salary with the same state-funded benefits.

It recommended the creation of a special "business docket" in Oakland and Wayne circuit courts as a way to reduce the time and expense of business litigation by creating a more reliable body of state business law.

The task force wants to see a mandated statewide judicial information and technology system priced at \$23.99 million, which is admittedly a "large, upfront state cost," but with "large long-term net savings."