



Home

State Bar's force report goes before House Judiciary Committee

Members of the state House Judiciary Committee appeared to be business-oriented Thursday when Janet Welch, executive director of the State Bar of Michigan, made a presentation on the Bar's recently released Judicial Crossroads Task Force Report.

The report offers suggestions on what can be done to fix the state's justice system during a massive state budget crisis, such as the state being responsible for funding an indigent defense system; making e-filing statewide; and a shared jurisdiction system that would reduce the number of judges.

Though the Legislature can only push for such legislation as court consolidation and indigent defense, the idea of a business docket perked the most interest.

Rep. Ken Horn, R-Frankenmuth, and Rep. Phil Cavanagh, D-Redford Twp., said they were intrigued by the three-year pilot program, which would be based in Oakland and Wayne counties, the state's most active court systems. It would involve two or three judges solely dedicated to business-to-business disputes.

When asked whether it would involve additional costs, Welch said once it's up and running, it would be a means of saving costs. She added that the business impact committee, which drafted the pilot idea, found that such a model would not take any resources away from each county's existing court system.

But actual cost numbers were what some committee members most hoped to review.

While Rep. Kurt Heise, R-Plymouth, called the report a "great first step," he added that he shared the same views as Rep. Bob Constan, D-Dearborn Heights, in that the two would have liked to see more specific recommendations with respect to court consolidations, pay cuts for judges and staffs, especially in southeast Michigan.

Essentially, "how we can see the kind of sacrifices of the judicial branch that, frankly, the rest of us are having to make, and, as we'll learn by the end of the day [following Gov. Rick Snyder's budget proposal presentation], that we're going to have to make even more of."

Welch said that there will be more specific numbers as concurrent jurisdiction plans go forward.

After the meeting, Rep. Mark Meadows, D-East Lansing, mentioned that there are bills ready to be introduced for indigent defense funding, and that stronger efforts would be made following last year's legislative

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collapse. In addition, Committee Chair Rep. John Walsh, R-Livonia, said that there would be a committee made up specifically for it.

Because of time restraints, Welch was invited to return to the next committee meeting for further questions on the report.

The report, which was written for members of the Legislature, the governor and the Michigan Supreme Court to review with the intent that they will consider making changes, can be found at www.michbar.org/judicialcrossroads.



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