

## REGION: Courts cut public access hours

### Move frees up workers to tackle backlogged cases

By TERI FIGUEROA - Staff Writer | Wednesday, November 19, 2008 7:17 PM PST

VISTA ---- Faced with a growing backlog of stalled cases and a lack of staff to tackle them, San Diego County courts are cutting back on the hours its counters will be open to the public.

And that may mean longer wait times for people who come to the county courthouses to copy a divorce case, dispute a traffic ticket, or check on the status of a small claims suit.

About 1,300 people walk up to the counters each day at the North County courthouse in Vista.

Starting Dec. 1, most departments at the Melrose Drive facility will close their counters an hour earlier, at 3:30 p.m. Other courts countywide also will be reducing their hours, with some opening later, others closing earlier.

Not affected by the changes are Vista's busy courtrooms.

The shorter hours are designed to give San Diego Superior Court staffers time to dive into the piles of files that need to be addressed.

The reduced hours appear to be here for the long haul, said Michael Roddy, executive director of San Diego Superior Court.

Blame it on the economy. The move comes because a hiring freeze means there are fewer people to do the work.

The number of court staffers working in Vista has dropped 10 percent through attrition over the last year, and the court has no plans ---- or money ---- to hire more people, according to numbers provided by the court.

Countywide, the courts have lost 4 percent of their staff though attrition.

"It's a balancing act between hours of access and trying to get work done," Roddy said.

The backlog leaves cases sitting stagnant while clerks scramble for time to update files. But shorter hours to service the public might mean longer wait times for people lined up at the counters.

Among those who might be cooling their heels are couriers from Baechler Investigative Services, which has a division dedicated to attorney services such as filing paperwork with the courts.

Owner Tony Baechler said Wednesday that he is trying to juggle schedules to "back everything up an hour." And it is not as easy as it sounds.

"It's actually a pretty big impact," Baechler said. "I'm sure it's not just us. Any attorney service in the town has the same problem."

But, he said, the backlog also has been a problem for his clients, with filings that used to take three days to filter through the internal court process now taking as long as three weeks.

The shorter public access hours are part of the larger belt-tightening trend. Faced with a thinning budget, the county courts began a hiring freeze about a year ago, and recently backed away from about \$13 million in planned technical projects, Roddy said.

"This is not a one-year phenomenon," Roddy said Tuesday. "I don't think we are going to quickly bounce back."

He said he is keeping an eye on the special session of the Legislature, and is concerned the court will take more fiscal cuts.

With 1,500 employees and a budget this year of \$227 million, San Diego's courts are the state's second-largest, behind Los Angeles.

Roddy said he is hoping the cuts in hours will not translate into longer wait times. As it stands, the wait can be more than an hour for people who need to access files for, say, taking care of traffic tickets.

The move comes as the San Diego Superior Court is getting busier.

In North County alone, the number of eviction filings is up 50 percent from what it was a year ago.

Changes to the court's Web site may help, including a new online option for paying traffic tickets.

And in October, the court began posting slightly more detailed information on the Web about individual civil and probate cases. The information, previously only available by calling the court or crossing the threshold into the business offices, includes a listing of what has been filed in the case.

"We are looking at each and every decision to see what is the right thing to do," Roddy said.

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