

Oakland County gets OK for more trial judges

By Tim Richard
staff writer

A legislative panel moved this week to add four more trial judges in Oakland County, at the same time rejecting the Supreme Court's call for "sunsetting" three underworked urban judges.

The House Judiciary Committee voted to add two Oakland Circuit Court judges and two 22nd District Court judges — one each in the first division (Walled Lake) and the second division (Clarkston). Judy Cunningham, Oakland Circuit Court administrator, gave the panel charts showing the criminal caseload had risen nearly 10 percent a year — from 5,269 in 1985 to 7,856 last year.

Total circuit court filings in the same period rose from 22,985 to

30,762 or nearly 6 percent a year. Oakland has 16 circuit judges and would elect two more in 1992 if the bill becomes law.

JOE MULLIN, staff member for the Oakland County Board of Commissioners, told a tired Judiciary panel that the board endorsed the need for two more judges in the county-funded district.

Mullin's testimony supported a study by Supreme Court administrator Marilyn Hall. It showed the Walled Lake court has three judges but a workload for 3.82, while the Clarkston court has one judge and a workload for 1.7.

The Walled Lake-headquartered court also serves the Milford, High-

land, Novi, Commerce, Rose and White Lake communities.

The same bill also renewed authorization for one additional judge each in the 47th District (Farmington area), the 35th District (Plymouth-Canton-Northville) and 48th District (Birmingham). Addition of those judges is subject to local unit funding.

The committee had little to argue about as it added those judges to House Bill 5437, sponsored by Rep. Claude Trim, R-Springfield. Deadline is May 12 for candidates to file for the Aug. 4 primary.

THE ARGUMENTS were over whether to "sunset" through retirement, one district judge apiece in

Pontiac, Flint, Lansing and Muskegon.

The panel dropped only Muskegon after judges in the other areas pleaded that the Supreme Court's figures inaccurately represented their workloads.

"We're a role model to youth. We can't afford to lose a black judge in Pontiac," said chief Judge William Waterman, noting that three of the four present judges are black.

The Supreme Court said the Pontiac district has work for only 2.1 judges, and Waterman replied, "If you look only at numbers, you'd be tempted to agree."

"But there's been an incredible increase in serious crime," he said. Pre-trial exams in murder cases

take two to three days compared to a few hours for less serious felonies.

"We have 1,300 to 1,400 felonies compared to 200 or 300 in the 48th District, Birmingham," Waterman said.

With 6 percent of Oakland County's population, Pontiac provides 30 percent of the prisoners in the county jail, he said. "By the way, all the half-way houses in Oakland County are in Pontiac."

THE JUDICIARY committee left unresolved the Supreme Court's proposal to add nine Court of Appeals judges to the 24-judge bench, at least until the districting question is resolved.

Michigan currently has three

Court of Appeals districts, which must have equal numbers of judges.

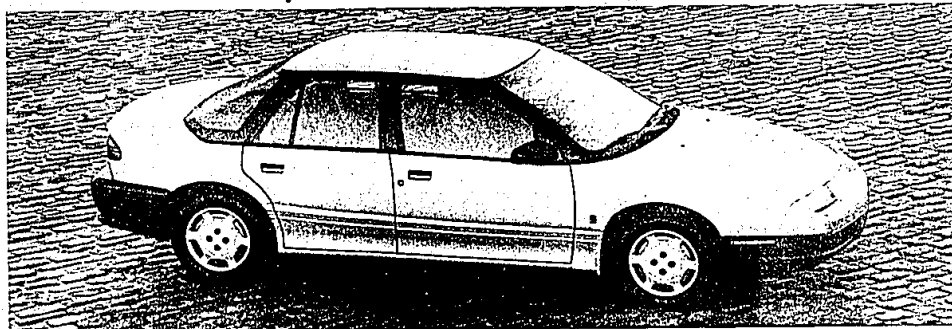
Some experts say Michigan's three-district system may violate the federal Voting Rights Act because it is so difficult for blacks, concentrated in Detroit, to get elected from their five-county district.

In addition, Gov. John Engler's budget for the fiscal year starting Oct. 1 provides no new money for a massive expansion of the Court of Appeals.

BUT CHIEF Judge Martin Doctoroff of Birmingham told lawmakers, "The Court of Appeals is drowning" in work.

Two years ago, its backlog was 1,400 cases; today it's 4,500.

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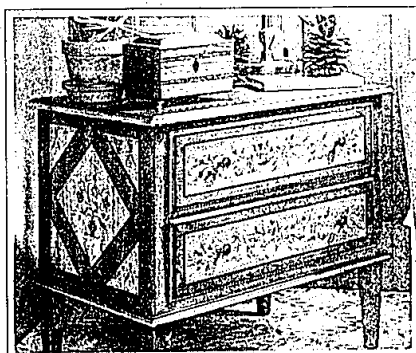
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