

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6222

As Passed Senate, February 13, 2024

Title: An act relating to the number of district court judges.

Brief Description: Concerning the number of district court judges.

Sponsors: Senators Wagoner, Dhingra and Lovick.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Law & Justice: 1/25/24, 1/30/24 [DP].

Floor Activity: Passed Senate: 2/13/24, 49-0.

Brief Summary of Bill

- Authorizes county legislative authorities to increase the number of district court judges.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON LAW & JUSTICE

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Dhingra, Chair; Trudeau, Vice Chair; Padden, Ranking Member; Kuderer, McCune, Pedersen, Salomon, Torres, Valdez, Wagoner and Wilson, L..

Staff: William Bridges (786-7312)

Background: District Courts. District courts are county courts with limited jurisdiction over criminal and civil cases. Their criminal jurisdiction includes misdemeanor and gross misdemeanor cases. Jurisdiction in civil cases includes damages for injury to individuals or personal property and contract disputes in amounts up to \$100,000 exclusive of interest, costs, and attorney fees.

District courts also have jurisdiction over traffic and non-traffic infractions, defined as civil

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proceedings for which a monetary penalty, but no jail sentence, may be imposed. District courts have jurisdiction to issue domestic violence and antiharassment protection orders and no-contact orders. They also have jurisdiction to hear change-of-name petitions and certain lien foreclosures. Districts courts also have small claims departments that can hear money claims up to \$5,000.

Changing the Number of District Court Judges. The number of district court judges in each county is set by statute. Any change in the number of full and part-time district court judges in a county is determined by the Legislature after receiving a recommendation from the Supreme Court, which is based on a workload analysis conducted by the Board for Judicial Administration. Changes in the number of district court judges may only be made in a year in which the quadrennial election for district court judges is to be held.

State law requires that the legislative authority of the county must approve any new district court judge and agree to pay the expenses associated with the new judge out of county funds and without reimbursement from the state.

Summary of Bill: Authorizing County Legislative Authorities to Increase the Number of District Court Judges. County legislative authorities are authorized to increase the number of their district court judges after receiving a recommendation from the Supreme Court. The state Legislature's role in changing the number of district court judges is removed.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members: No.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony: PRO: District courts are funded by counties, not the Legislature, yet the Legislature has the sole authority to decide if a county should have additional district court judges. Because the Legislature has no skin in the game, the decision to have additional district court judges should be made by the affected counties. The current process to create new district court judges is long and cumbersome, leading to inefficiencies and expensive stop-gap solutions like hiring pro tem judges. The current process is also not timed to allow for new judges to attend the mandatory judicial college in a timely manner.

Persons Testifying: PRO: Senator Keith Wagoner, Prime Sponsor; Judge Jennifer Rancourt, District & Municipal Court Judges' Association.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: No one.