

HOUSE BILL REPORT

HB 1144

As Reported by House Committee On:

Civil Rights & Judiciary
Appropriations

Title: An act relating to adding an additional superior court judge in Skagit county.

Brief Description: Adding an additional superior court judge in Skagit county.

Sponsors: Representatives Lekanoff, Low, Ramel, Shavers and Paul; by request of Administrative Office of the Courts.

Brief History:

Committee Activity:

Civil Rights & Judiciary: 1/15/25, 1/22/25 [DP];
Appropriations: 2/5/25, 2/10/25 [DPS].

Brief Summary of Substitute Bill

- Increases from four to five the number of statutorily authorized superior court judges in Skagit County.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON CIVIL RIGHTS & JUDICIARY

Majority Report: Do pass. Signed by 13 members: Representatives Taylor, Chair; Farivar, Vice Chair; Walsh, Ranking Minority Member; Abell, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Burnett, Entenman, Goodman, Graham, Jacobsen, Peterson, Salahuddin, Thai and Walen.

Staff: Yelena Baker (786-7301).

Background:

Superior courts are courts of general jurisdiction and handle felony and other criminal

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matters, civil matters, domestic relations matters, guardianship and probate matters, juvenile matters, and child dependency cases. Additionally, superior court judges hear appeals from lower courts and appeals from state administrative agencies.

The number of superior court judges in each county is set by statute. Any change in the number of full- and part-time judges in a county's superior court is determined by the Legislature after receiving a recommendation from the Board for Judicial Administration (BJA). The BJA's recommendation is based on an objective workload analysis developed annually by the Administrative Office of the Courts. The objective workload analysis takes into account available judicial resources and the caseload activity of the court.

Article 4, section 13 of the Washington Constitution provides that the state and the county share the cost for superior court judges. Benefits and one-half of the salary of a superior court judge are paid by the state. The other half of the judge's salary and all other costs associated with a judicial position, such as capital and support staff costs, are borne by the county.

Summary of Bill:

An additional superior court judicial position is created in Skagit County, changing the number of superior court judges from four to five.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) Skagit County Superior Court is under-resourced and needs an additional judicial officer to continue providing effective and equitable access to justice in the Skagit County community.

Based on the latest judicial needs estimate, Skagit County is in need of seven full-time judicial officers to support their increased and growing need. Currently, the court has four full-time judges, two full-time commissioners and one part-time commissioner. One of these full-time commissioner positions was created as a temporary position and funded by the Skagit County Commissioners to address the pandemic backlog, and that temporary position expires in June 2025. A fifth, permanent, full-time judge will allow the Skagit

County Superior Court to meet the demands of daily hearings and emergency requests while still handling trials.

Over the last several years, there have been substantial changes in case law and statutes, such as changes to minor guardianships, dependencies, and protection orders, and these changes have reshaped the way that pretrial hearings are conducted, which means that more court time is dedicated to those types of hearings. While these changes are a positive development, they are part of what is extending that bench time that could also be dedicated toward trials, and that is another reason why the additional judge is needed.

Adding another judge to the court will also help with a project to develop a case flow management system that would give the court more ability to handle family law, dependency, and minor guardianship trials.

Skagit County Board of Commissioners has provided formal proof of support for this request and their commitment to fund their portion. In addition, they are working to construct a new courtroom, a space to accommodate the growing needs of the Skagit County Superior Court.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Debra Lekanoff, prime sponsor; Haily Perkins, Administrative Office of the Courts; Judge Laura Riquelme, Skagit County Superior Court; and Commissioner Peter Browning, Skagit County Board of Commissioners.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS

Majority Report: The substitute bill be substituted therefor and the substitute bill do pass. Signed by 30 members: Representatives Ormsby, Chair; Gregerson, Vice Chair; Macri, Vice Chair; Connors, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Penner, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Schmick, Assistant Ranking Minority Member; Berg, Bergquist, Burnett, Caldier, Callan, Corry, Cortes, Doglio, Dye, Fitzgibbon, Keaton, Leavitt, Lekanoff, Manjarrez, Marshall, Peterson, Pollet, Rude, Ryu, Springer, Stonier, Street, Thai and Tharinger.

Minority Report: Without recommendation. Signed by 1 member: Representative Couture, Ranking Minority Member.

Staff: Yvonne Walker (786-7841).

Summary of Recommendation of Committee On Appropriations Compared to Recommendation of Committee On Civil Rights & Judiciary:

A null and void clause is added, making the bill null and void unless funded in the budget.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Available.

Effective Date of Substitute Bill: The bill takes effect 90 days after adjournment of the session in which the bill is passed. However, the bill is null and void unless funded in the budget.

Staff Summary of Public Testimony:

(In support) The commissioners of Skagit County have plans and have built a budget capacity to incorporate an additional judge within their county. The county has funded a court commissioner through the end of 2025 with the hope of being able to obtain an additional superior court judge in 2026. The latest judicial needs estimate shows the county needs a total of seven superior judges. Currently the Skagit County is under resourced, and this additional judge will provide the county's superior court with much needed support.

(Opposed) None.

Persons Testifying: Representative Debra Lekanoff, prime sponsor; Lisa Janicki, Skagit County Board of Commissioners; and Brittany Gregory, Administrative Office of the Courts.

Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying: None.