



ALASKA COURT SYSTEM

State of Alaska

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HOUSE BILL 77

NUMBER OF SUPERIOR COURT JUDGES

Version A

Sponsor Statement

The Alaska Court System is requesting a change to AS 22.10.120 to increase the number of superior court judges in the state from 43 to 45. Specifically, the court is seeking authorization for two additional superior court seats so that the existing district court judgeships in Homer and Valdez can each be converted to superior court judgeships. Superior court judges have broader jurisdiction than district court judges; the change would allow the new judges to handle a greater variety of cases, thus ensuring that the caseload in the Third Judicial District is handled more efficiently and effectively.

Currently, Homer has one district court judge, who is planning to retire on June 28, 2019. That judge does not have the authority to handle superior court matters, such as felony cases, child-in-need-of-aid cases, and family law cases; instead, superior court cases filed in Homer are handled by a superior court judge from Kenai who travels there for that work. That approach to the caseload is a growing strain on the Kenai judges, and is not a sustainable or efficient way to handle the cases on the Kenai Peninsula. With the current judge retiring, this is an opportune time to convert that seat to one with more expansive jurisdiction, so that the one judge in Homer can handle all the cases.

Similarly, the Valdez court currently has one district court judgeship, and that position has been covering all the trial court cases in Glennallen, Cordova, and Valdez. That Valdez district court judge has now been appointed to a judgeship in Juneau. Having a dedicated superior court judge in this slot would enable that judge to cover even more coastal communities, and would provide flexibility in handling felonies, CINA cases, and all other filings throughout the Third District.

Because the Homer and Valdez district court judge seats are vacant or soon will be, this bill is timely; if passed this session, the solicitation for applicants to those two positions will be for a superior court rather than a district court judge.

In both Homer and Valdez, the court plans to use and share existing resources and existing staff from surrounding courts to support the superior court judges, and is not seeking funding for additional judicial assistants, law clerks, or in-court clerks. The new superior court judges will use the already-existing courtroom and materials from the district court positions, so that no additional capital resources are necessary.

The Administrative Director and the Chief Justice have carefully studied case filing patterns and judicial coverage in these areas of the state for a number of years. They, along with the Supreme Court and presiding judicial officers, have considered alternatives and consequences, and have concluded that reclassifying these positions will be effective, efficient, fiscally responsible, and helpful to Alaskans.

The only fiscal impact of this bill will be the difference between the salary and benefits for a district court judge and the salary/benefits for a superior court judge, which amounts to \$71,000 per year; from this, we will experience a decline in travel expenses of approximately \$9,000 per year, for a net fiscal impact of \$62,000 per year.

Carrying the bill on behalf of the Alaska Court System: Nancy Meade, General Counsel