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# County closer to receiving new district court

## Bills passed in House, Senate await reconciliation; one or two new judges possible

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district would be formed by Jan. 1, 2007.

And on Thursday, the Senate passed an omnibus court bill, Senate Bill 1159, that also adds a Hidalgo County court, naming it the 430th District Court. It also reorganizes the district courts that serve Willacy County.

It will not be clear until the House and Senate reconcile the bills whether Hidalgo County will have one or two new district courts.

"The need for a new judicial



**"The need for a new judicial district court in Hidalgo County is obvious ..."**

— State Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, author of House Bill 1153

district court in Hidalgo County is obvious, and I am delighted to work with local community leaders to ensure our judicial system functions properly," Gonzales said of her House bill.

The Senate bill also requires district courts in Hidalgo County to implement a computerized system for assigning cases.

The new Hidalgo County district court created in the Senate

bill will have family violence and criminal cases as its priority.

Judges who currently take those cases will be free to take other cases.

"Victims of family violence deserve to have their cases heard in a timely manner so that they can work towards bringing closure to a difficult chapter in their lives," said state Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, who sits on the Senate Jurisprudence Committee.

According to Gonzales' bill, the first judge of the 418th Judi-

cial District in Hidalgo County would be appointed by the governor, and then elected in subsequent elections.

The state will pay nearly \$130,000 a year for the salary and benefits of the new judge.

But most of the costs of the new court will be paid by the county, according to the Legislative Budget Board, the nonpartisan state agency that determines the cost of bills.

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Hidalgo County pays an average of almost \$20,000 annually to each of its nine judges to supplement their salaries. In addition, the county will have to pay a one-time start-up cost of \$500,000 and almost \$300,000 a year to staff and operate the judicial district, according to the LBB.

In all, Hidalgo County must come up with \$817,000 for the court in 2007 and \$317,000 in subsequent years, according to the LBB.

Hidalgo County Judge Ramon Garcia said the county has a "healthy fund balance" and can pay for the court.

"The numbers are clearly

there to justify the creation of a new district court," Garcia said. "We have a tremendous backlog of both civil and criminal cases, (and) a new court will go a long way toward eliminating that backlog."

The Senate bill also changes the shape of the Willacy County district court.

Six judges now hear cases in Cameron and Willacy counties. The bill would designate five of those judges for Cameron County and allow one to continue hearing cases in Willacy County.

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