

State cuts threaten to blunt justice system

A sense of confidence in the courts is essential to maintain the fabric of ordered liberty for a free people," former Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger said. The things that "could destroy that confidence and do incalculable damage to society," he added, include inefficiency and delays in the judicial system and people believing the courts no longer protect their legal rights and keep them safe.

Sadly, it looks as if we are heading into that crisis of confidence.

At a time when the numbers of San Francisco homicides, shooting victims, auto thefts, auto burglaries and domestic violence incidents have increased by double digits — and when there are scores of homicide cases sitting in the District Attorney's Office awaiting prosecution — The City's judicial system is about to be gutted.

Forty-one percent of San Francisco Superior Court staff will be laid off, and 40 percent of courtrooms will be closed in September due to California's latest \$150 million in cuts to the statewide judiciary. Those cuts are in addition to the \$200 million already slashed earlier this year.

Justice delayed is justice denied, as the saying goes. San Francisco courts will prioritize criminal cases and urgent civil matters such as restraining orders and evictions, but hearings could still take months. As for lower-priority cases, they are out of luck.

It's already taking some civil cases nearly two years to move through the system. Divorces, child-custody and other family-law matters will take between eight and 18 months longer to settle after 200 court clerks, court reporters, research attorneys and management employees are no longer on the job and

25 courtrooms have been closed, according to Michael Yuen, the Superior Court's chief executive officer.

The court's presiding judge, Katherine Feinstein, said, "Justice will be on hiatus." California Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye said she's "completely dismayed" and called the cuts "unsustainable."

Even worse, the judicial system is being dismantled at the same time that plans are under way to release tens of thousands of inmates from state prisons to relieve overcrowding.

Yes, the state has a budget crisis and is forced to make many painful cuts. But it's hard to imagine what Gov. Jerry Brown and Democratic state legislators were thinking when they chose to place public safety on the chopping block. They should have first looked at cutting excessive wages and benefits from the state's bloated payroll, cutting

benefits for undocumented immigrants and privatizing inefficient state services.

"Courts are not a luxury," Cantil-Sakauye said. "They are at the heart of our democracy. These cuts threaten access to justice for all."

California's leaders have assaulted a foundation of our democracy. Fortunately, this crime can ultimately be adjudicated at the ballot box.



FROM READERS

Mayoral candidates' ideas on Muni welcome

As 34-year San Francisco residents, my wife and I have been dismayed and disappointed in the long-term decline of the municipal transportation system, especially the trains serving the Market Street corridor. Years ago, riders could expect occasional delays and rush-hour crowds, but over the years it seems the occasional is now the routine as service deteriorates to an unacceptable level.

Even though we are within walking distance to the Forest Hill and West Portal Muni stations, we go out of our way to ride BART. Or we drive and park in increasingly expensive downtown lots. Yet we count ourselves fortunate because we have options, while many residents are forced to depend on Muni.

As ex-Mayor Willie Brown learned, there are no quick fixes to Muni, but we would greatly appreciate hearing a clear and honest analysis of the transit problem from this new group of mayoral candidates, with proposals for improvement.

Steve and Annie Abney
San Francisco

Stop whining about meters

I'm tired of people complaining about having to pay for parking meters on holidays. The purpose of parking meters is to generate revenue for cities and to create turnover so that other people can park in the spot to do their errands through the day. Enforcing meters on holidays such as Independence Day is even

TODAY'S CARTOON By Chip Bok/Creators Syndicate



more appropriate than on a normal day, since it's an especially busy time when spots in high-demand areas are limited.

While everyone likes things to be free, there would be an even greater shortage of parking if not for meters being enforced on holidays. Having to pay will encourage some people to park in garages or use public transit instead of occupying a street spot. All the whiners should just be happy that Sundays are still free at most meters in The City.

Marc Schoenfeld
San Francisco

Firefighters deserve better

The photo caption in your June 23 Jeff Adachi op-ed states that the City Hall pension reform plan for firefighters doesn't require sufficient contributions. Firefighters have a tough and often-unenviable job where their lives are on the line

daily. What kind of cost are we looking at?

Let us not forget the two fallen firefighters, Lt. Vincent Perez and Anthony Valerio. They paid the ultimate price by giving their lives. By the way, Adachi's column was placed under the wrong heading. It should have been The Daily Outrage.

Martha Pahnke
Colma

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By email: letters@sfxaminer.com
By mail: Editorial Page Editor
The Examiner
71 Stevenson St., 2nd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94105
By fax: (415) 359-2766

Failed weapons operation appears to be a cover-up

It's been nearly four decades since Watergate, so perhaps we should not be surprised that memories have faded about one of the crucial lessons of that scandal: The cover-up is always worse than the original crime. This amnesia even affects law enforcement officials, notably Attorney General Eric Holder and others in the Justice Department.

Evidence turned up by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform suggests these officials knew a great deal more about Operation Fast and Furious than they have so far admitted. Fast and Furious was the outrageous program implemented by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives in which firearms were intentionally sold in the U.S. to agents of Mexican drug cartels. The idea was that the guns would be traced to cartel "higher-ups" after being used in crimes and thereby strengthen law enforcement investigations and prosecutions in the U.S. and Mexico.

However, it's become clear the operation didn't work as intended. Weapons that were sold with ATF approval, including assault rifles and other highly dangerous firearms, have since been used in nearly two dozen murders on both sides of the border, including that of U.S. Border Patrol Agent Brian Terry in Arizona a few days before Christmas.

In the aftermath of the Terry killing, the program was shut down and top Justice Department officials denied knowing anything about Fast and Furious. But ATF Acting Director Kenneth Melson has described multiple oral and written communications he had with senior Justice officials about the program both before and after Terry was killed.

And that's where the cover-up becomes relevant. The House panel has run into a wall of evasion, delay and resistance from the Justice Department to all requests for information and documents concerning Fast and Furious.

In a letter to Holder earlier this week, Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista, said Melson told congressional investigators the "ATF's senior leadership would have preferred to be far more cooperative with our inquiry much earlier in the process. However, he said that Justice Department officials directed them not to respond and took full control of replying to briefing and document requests to Congress."

We look forward to hearing the explanations of Justice Department higher-ups who allegedly told Melson not to respond to the panel's requests and who, according to Issa, thereby "sent over false denials" and "distorted the truth and obstructed our investigation." We also might find out what they were so determined to keep from Issa.