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## County may get 4 new judges this year

### Governor pledges to appoint more minorities to bench

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Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger could appoint four judges to Ventura County Superior Court by the end of the year. One new judge will be appointed in June because of a newly created court, and three other judges are expected to retire by the end of the year.

Ventura County and the state could also see more minority judges in the near future because the governor has made a commitment to have a more ethnically diverse judiciary, said Sabrina Lockhart, a spokeswoman for the governor.

Criticized for appointing few minorities to the bench, Schwarzenegger is working to prove that he isn't giving lip service to judicial diversity. Earlier this year, he appointed Sharon Majors-Lewis as judicial appointments secretary. Majors-Lewis is both the first woman and the first black to hold the post in California, said Lockhart.

The governor's office has been successful in attracting more minority candidates. Its pool jumped 29 percent last year, said Lockhart.

Judge Colleen Toy White, presiding judge for the county's Superior Court, said diversity is welcome and encouraged qualified candidates to apply.

"We are aware of the need to have the bench reflect our community, and I think we are all committed to doing that," she said. "It is important so when people walk into the courthouse it doesn't intimidate them."

Ventura County has 28 judges and four commissioners, of whom three are minorities. There are six female justices.

Schwarzenegger is going to be busy appointing dozens of new judges.

Lockhart said Senate Bill 56 created 150 new judgeships to be added to the state's courthouses within the next three years. She said \$5.5 million was appropriated to begin adding the first batch of 50 judges for fiscal year 2006-2007.

The remaining 100 judgeships will be added to the state's judicial system when more money is appropriated, Lockhart said.

The judge's salaries, staff and new trial courts will be funded by the state.

Minority lawyer advocacy groups say diversity is important because it builds a sense of trust and fairness in the judiciary.

Attorney Greg Ramirez, vice president of the Ventura County Mexican American Bar Association, said the reality is that the majority of those using the courthouse are Hispanics, and many don't speak the language. Judges on the bench should reflect the population, he said.

Ramirez said he understands those who would make the argument that everybody should learn and speak English.

"I appreciate it. The reality is that they don't," he said.

Selecting a Hispanic or minority to fill judicial shoes is much more than adding color to the bench, Ramirez said.

"It is someone who understands the community through their own experience. It doesn't just mean putting a brown face up there," he said.

Alvin Arzu, president of the African American Bar Association of Ventura County, said diversity gives people a sense of trust in a justice system.

He called the governor's decision to appoint Majors-Lewis as the headhunter for judicial job applicants a step in the right direction.

Dien Le, the outgoing president of the Ventura County Asian American Bar Association, said his group would like to see an Asian American judge because there are none in Ventura County.

He said the Asian American population is growing rapidly in the county.

The group is throwing its support to Leah Gasendo; the African American Bar Association is backing Prosecutor Chrystina Jenson. Ramirez said the Mexican American Bar isn't supporting any specific lawyer at this time.

Lockhart would not release information on the number of candidates from Ventura County who have applied for judgeships.

Candidates for judgeships must be members in good standing with the State Bar of California for at least 10 years.

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