[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Calif. Judges Not Sharing State's Economic Pain

By [PAUL ELIAS](#)

Updated 12:28 PM PDT, Tue, Mar 31, 2009

Related Topics: [Los Angeles County](#) | [Judiciary](#) | [Sacramento](#)



Getty Images

Feb. 24, 2009: Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts joins Justice Anthony Kennedy, Justice Clarence Thomas and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg in applauding the arrival of U.S. President Barack Obama prior for a joint meeting of the U.S. Congress.

California has furloughed workers and slashed programs to close a \$41 billion budget gap, but it still has more than 400 judges in [Los Angeles County](#) who each make more than the chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Judges in [Tulare County](#) still get free health club memberships. Those in Kern County can count on a \$600-a-month car allowance. And colleagues in other counties get perks such as funds for "professional development" and money to buy extra health insurance.

Eighteen of California's 58 counties give more than 800 superior court judges about \$25 million a year in extra benefits on top of their \$179,000 state salaries, even as they lay off employees and reduce services amid the recession. The state picks up the tab for extras in 19 counties.

An appellate court found that some of the perks were unconstitutional, but a lobbying effort by judges in the Legislature has helped keep the benefits in place.

Defenders of the system say the supplemental benefits are necessary to attract and retain good lawyers, who

often take a pay cut to serve in the judiciary.

The heftiest perks go to Los Angeles County judges, who get \$46,000 a year from the county on top of their state salaries, giving them a total of \$225,000. U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts makes \$217,400 per year, and associate justices bring in \$208,100.

An appellate court last year ruled that the Los Angeles County perks, which cost \$21 million annually, were unconstitutional. But the judges fiercely resisted attempts to do away with the extra funds, hiring a law firm and [Sacramento](#) lobbyist to resist challenges to the benefits.

The California Judges Association also hired a Sacramento lobbyist and joined forces with the judiciary's administrative office to get legislation passed earlier this year protecting the county-provided benefits.

During budget wrangling in the wee hours of Feb. 19, the Legislature reinstated the perks through a bill that allows counties to phase out the benefits if they choose.

"[Los Angeles](#) judges are quietly one the most powerful lobbying groups in the state," said Robert Stern, president of the Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles.

[Curt Child](#), who is the Administrative Office of the Courts' top Sacramento lobbyist, said the legislation was necessary to stave off legal chaos and defections from the bench while judicial officials figure out an equitable salary scheme for all superior court judges.

"Quite frankly, many of these judges went on the bench understanding and relying that these benefits were there," said Child, who also said the state Constitution bars reducing an active judge's salary.

State-funded perks include gym memberships for 14 Tulare County judges at a combined cost of \$10,428 annually.

"We have a health and wellness program," said LaRayne Cleek, the county court executive officer. "We felt, if we had healthy families and judges, we would have fewer sick days."

In the 1990s, the courts eliminated the state's municipal court and promoted those judges to the superior court. Then in 1997 the court system was brought under exclusive state control.

The reorganization was supposed to eliminate the often Byzantine funding process where the state and counties were both paying judges.

But in many counties what critics call "double-dipping" has continued.

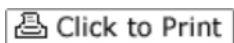
"Somebody forgot to turn off the financial spigot in Los Angeles County," said Sterling "Ernie" Norris, a lawyer for the conservative political group Judicial Watch, which sued Los Angeles County in 2006 over its perks.

Some perks have been reduced over the years, and others could go soon. San Bernardino County Supervisor Neil Derry has proposed phasing out the \$1.4 million spent locally to boost the pay of 67 judges by \$19,300 each for things such as "personal security."

"It's a moral issue," Derry said. "It doesn't make a whole lot of sense."

Find this article at:

<http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Calif-Judges.html>



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© NBC Universal, Inc. | All Rights Reserved.