

**SUBJECT:** Creating an additional judicial district in Travis County

**COMMITTEE:** Judiciary—favorable, without amendment

**VOTE:** 5 ayes — Hartnett, Gonzales, Hopson, Solis, Straus  
0 nays  
4 absent — Hughes, Alonzo, Keel, Van Arsdale

**WITNESSES:** For — Susan Spataro, Travis County District Judges (Criminal Branch), Travis County Commissioner’s Court, Travis County Auditor;  
(*Registered, but did not testify:* April Bacon)  
Against — None

**BACKGROUND:** Travis County has nine civil district courts and six criminal district courts. The 403rd Judicial District was added in 2000.

**DIGEST:** HB 968 would create the 427th Judicial District, composed of Travis County, as of January 1, 2007. The district court would be required to give preference to criminal matters.  
  
The bill would take effect September 1, 2005.

**SUPPORTERS SAY:** HB 968 would promote judicial efficiency by creating a new district court for Travis County, where overloaded dockets currently are denying parties the right to obtain timely justice.  
  
Travis County has experienced massive population growth over the last few years, which has had a significant impact on the existing district courts. The workload in the criminal courts and the complexity of these cases has increased significantly. In fiscal 2004, the number of felony cases added per Travis County felony court was 2,203. This is the highest among the top five urban counties in the state. Adding another district court would be a cost effective way to relieve existing Travis County criminal courts of overcrowded dockets while speeding up the administration of justice.

Travis County has done what it could to make the use of the existing district courts more efficient. The courts have used visiting judges to move cases along more quickly, yet those charged with crimes still must wait long periods of time before trial. Moreover, Travis County cannot continue to rely on the use of visiting judges because funding to the program was cut substantially in 2003. Neither the House version nor the Senate version of the general appropriations bill would increase funding of the program in fiscal 2006-07 to its former levels.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

By fiscal 2008, HB 968 would cost the state more than \$129,000 per year, money that should be directed toward more pressing state budget needs. Travis County recently received a new district court in 2000. If Travis County still needs help to reduce its docket, it should continue to rely on visiting judges already paid for by money appropriated to the visiting judge fund.

**NOTES:**

The bill's fiscal note estimates that creating a new court in Travis County would cost about \$76,000 in fiscal 2007 and about \$130,000 per fiscal year thereafter in general revenue-related funds for the salary and benefits of a district judge.

The companion bill, SB 835 by Barrientos, was considered and left pending by the Senate Jurisprudence Committee on April 6.