

# Tampa Bay Times

WINNER OF 12 PULITZER PRIZES

## Sen. J.D. Alexander suggests paying Florida judges bonuses to hear more cases



Steve Bousquet, Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau

Wednesday, March 23, 2011 3:02pm

TALLAHASSEE — As Florida courts groan under the weight of heavy case backlogs, a powerful senator is suggesting a highly controversial remedy: paying judges more money to hear more cases.

Republican Sen. J.D. Alexander, the influential budget chairman from Lake Wales, wants to pay trial court judges up to an additional \$12,000 a year if they meet specific numerical quarterly performance goals. The extra money would be dished out in \$3,000 increments.

"I'm very serious about it," Alexander said. "What we're trying to do is create some incentives for the courts that are fair and reasonable and save us a lot of money."

Alexander's so-called Judicial Workload Incentive Plan is expected to be part of the proposed Senate budget to be considered next week, but it's already receiving a mostly hostile reception among senators who directly oversee the judicial branch's budget.

Despite Alexander's unmatched clout when it comes to legislative spending, senators aren't shy about openly lampooning his idea.

"Judges don't need this," said Sen. Mike Bennett, R-Bradenton. "I think they like to claim they're professionals. I don't think they need to be rewarded for managing their dockets."

Alexander's outside-the-box bonus plan has raised hackles for another reason: Prosecutors and public defenders, who actually try cases, are being asked to absorb another round of budget cuts — 6 percent in the Senate — which will mean fewer people to try cases.

If anybody deserves a raise in the court system, Bennett argued, it's front-line prosecutors and public defenders, many of whom earn less than \$40,000 a year and are saddled with huge loans from law school.

"But a judge who's knocking down a buck and a quarter? Do your job," Bennett said. "Nobody else I know in the state of Florida is getting a raise."

Sen. Mike Fasano, R-New Port Richey, also pointed to the pay gap between judges and other state workers.

"We certainly shouldn't be giving them a bonus to do the work they're doing," Fasano said. "The rank-and-file workers in this state haven't seen a pay raise in almost four years. Many of them are barely getting by."

Circuit judges in Florida earn \$142,178 a year, and county judges, who mostly handle misdemeanors and small claims, are paid \$134,280.

Pinellas-Pasco Circuit Chief Judge Thomas McGrady also criticized Alexander's proposal.

"It presumes that we're not managing cases the way they think we should, and I don't accept that premise," McGrady said Wednesday. "We're trying to close as many as we can."

On the Fasano-led Senate budget Subcommittee on Criminal and Civil Justice Appropriations, only Republican Sen. Ronda Storms defended Alexander's proposal.

"Justice delayed is justice denied," Storms told senators. "All up and down the line, people are not moving their dockets. I think it's a good idea."

The court system didn't ask for the \$11 million in bonus money, and judges are sensitive to the perception that they work light schedules, especially on Fridays.

Then there's the perception of so-called cash register justice — that if judges have a financial incentive to try cases faster, they may be tempted to cut corners by denying continuances in cases.

"While the concept is good and we want efficiency in our judicial system, I think it's hard to quantify the number of cases you hear. They're all different," said Sen. John Thrasher, R-St. Augustine, a lawyer and a member of the courts' budget panel. "Every single lawyer that comes in has a different methodology of how they try cases."

Democratic Sen. Arthenia Joyner of Tampa, a lawyer, said the state can't afford the bonus money and most judges are already conscientious about managing their cases.

"The judges are already personally motivated to move their dockets," Joyner said.

As the Senate and House slowly begin their elaborate spring dance and resolve a multitude of budgetary differences, the incentive plan is nowhere to be found in the House, and Speaker Dean Cannon has no official position, his spokeswoman said.

The Florida Bar has not taken a position on Alexander's incentive plan.

Circuit Judges Belvin Perry of Orlando and John Laurent of Bartow, who closely monitor any legislation affecting judges, both said they did not know enough about the incentive program to comment on it.

*Steve Bousquet can be reached at [bousquet@sptimes.com](mailto:bousquet@sptimes.com) or (850) 224-7263.*

**Sen. J.D. Alexander suggests paying Florida judges bonuses to hear more cases 03/23/11**  
**Photo reprints | Article reprints**

---

© 2016 Tampa Bay Times



[Commenting Guidelines](#)



[Abuse Policy](#)