

Pinellas-Pasco night traffic courts being put to rest

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Night court might be the only convenient thing about getting a traffic ticket — you can fight your ticket without missing work or skipping school.

But now it's become the latest casualty of the state's never-ending budget crisis.

Night traffic court will be eliminated in Pinellas and Pasco counties, is endangered in Hillsborough and could be on its last legs statewide.

"That money has been eliminated," said Pinellas-Pasco Chief Judge Robert Morris Jr. "It has been totally taken from the court's budget without any expectation that it will ever come back.

"There is literally no money to fund the program."

Morris said the decision was made by the state courts administrator in Tallahassee and could affect every circuit in Florida.

"What we're talking about is going to occur from Key West to Pensacola," the chief judge said.

The *St. Petersburg Times* on Friday could not determine with state court officials the fate of other night court programs.

Night court is held eight times a week in Pinellas, split between Clearwater and St. Petersburg. It's twice a week in Hillsborough and Pasco. Lawyers are hired and trained to hear civil traffic infraction cases, such as speeding or running a red light. Criminal infractions such as DUI or driving with a suspended license are heard by a county judge.

If county governments hadn't stepped in with extra funding, judges say, night courts would have folded in April.

That was just a reprieve. The last night court sessions in Pinellas and Pasco are scheduled for September. Then the circuit will eliminate the program and let go of its 14 hearing officers.

The Hillsborough circuit is still looking for a solution — but no night court hearings are set past September.

"After that," said Hillsborough Chief Judge Manuel Menendez Jr., "I can't tell you."

It's not just a convenience for the public. For some, it's a necessity.

"We anticipate more will plead guilty because they won't have the time to take off from work and come in during the day," said Pasco chief deputy clerk Paula O'Neil. They also expect more people who simply won't show up for court.

Night court also is convenient for law enforcement. No patrol officer wants to sit around traffic court waiting for a case to be called. But for night-shift officers, at least they can attend court while at work.

When those officers go to day court, on their off-hours, it'll cost their agencies even more money.

"Closing the night traffic court could have an increase in overtime," said Pasco sheriff's spokesman Kevin Doll. "It could also take some of our motor deputies off the road during the day, because that's when they would have to go to court."

According to the Pinellas Clerk of the Court, the number of civil traffic cases heard at night the last fiscal year was close to 14 percent, or 7,447 cases. In Pasco, about 7 percent — 4,583 — of 2007's civil traffic caseload was heard at night.

The end of night court in Pinellas and Pasco counties will cause a cascading effect. Those traffic cases will be dumped onto the daytime dockets of county judges. The workload for judges and staff will grow, courtroom wait times will increase and even courthouse parking will get harder.

Judge Menendez said the Hillsborough circuit is considering such ideas as closing a county civil division and moving a judge to night traffic court.

And this could be just the start of another round of judicial budget cuts. The state has told the Pinellas-Pasco and Hillsborough circuits to prepare for layoffs.

"The budget picture," Judge Morris of Pinellas-Pasco said, "is a worsening picture."

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