

The Sun

**Court chief won't assign judge to booking center
Rasin favors video use, more home detention**

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Rejecting a proposal that could save taxpayers as much as \$7 million a year, Maryland's District Court chief said in a report to the General Assembly that she will not provide a judge for the Baltimore Central Booking and Intake Center courtroom

Instead, Judge Martha F. Rasin is recommending that the state use more video technology, place more pretrial inmates in home detention and get cases in court faster to save court and pretrial detention costs. "There's no need for the judge to go to the jail in order to achieve the objectives," Rasin said yesterday.

But Del. Peter Franchot, chairman of the House of Delegates subcommittee that reviews public safety issues, said that Rasin's recommendations have been heard before and it was determined they would have only a minimal impact on savings.

"That falls short of what we hoped the court would produce," said the Montgomery County Democrat, who was briefed on the report and plans a hearing on it in the next few weeks, after the General Assembly session begins.

Franchot, whose subcommittee is part of the House Appropriations Committee, suggested that the District Court's opposition to having a judge in central booking might have an impact when its budget is reviewed.

"Not having a District Court judge at the central booking is a colossal waste of tax dollars in the neighborhood of \$5 [million] to \$7 million dollars a year," he said.

The recommendation for a courtroom at central booking was one of the proposals that resulted from a University of Maryland study of the operation. That study was conducted for the state Department of Public Safety and Correctional Services, which oversees central booking, to find ways to cut costs associated with transporting defendants from jail to court and from long stays in jail before trial.

It is believed that a judge at central booking could help speed the processing of simple cases, reducing the days a defendant spends in jail before going to court. It costs \$55 a day to house one inmate in the center.

As a result of the study, the Baltimore Circuit Court began hearing cases at central booking in April. However, Circuit Court officials said their cases make up 10 percent to 20 percent of all cases and that a District Court judge or "cross-designation" -- authority given to a circuit judge to handle District Court cases -- is needed.

"I would like to see it operating as a five-day-a-week court," said Judge Joseph H. H. Kaplan, administrative judge of the Circuit Court. "It would help with transportation and security problems."

Stuart O. Simms, secretary of public safety, has met with Rasin about the report and is trying to reach an agreement on how to run the central booking court.

"They agree on some issues and disagree on others," said Leonard A. Sipes, spokesman for public safety. "They're going to continue their dialogue, and Secretary Simms will try to find a consensus with Judge Rasin."

But Rasin said she stands firm on her position that a District Court judge is not needed at central booking. In her report, she said the Circuit Court handles six or seven cases of limited complexity -- referred to as Quality Review Cases -- a week at central booking, while the District Court handles 35 such cases a week in the courthouse.

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Instead of a judge at central booking, Rasin suggests that cases in which the charges are going to be dropped could be handled over a video system rather than transporting defendants to the courthouse; the central booking courtroom could be used as a site for video bail reviews; and cases could be placed on the Quality Review Case docket.

"That way we could do more of them and do them faster," she said

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