Editorial: Brown's budget not kind to court system

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Jan. 16, 2013, Los Angeles Times.***

Not long before the economy collapsed in 2008, California's courts raised many fees and fines to pay for a far-reaching program of courthouse construction. The plan was not for new judicial palaces or unnecessary luxury, but for replacing buildings that were designed with a 1950s population in mind and constructed with equally outdated techniques that now jeopardize the safety of jurors, litigants and everyone else who uses them. The state's budget distress put most of the program on hold as money from those higher fines and fees, which were imposed on a public also feeling the financial hard times, was diverted to pay for basic operations after court funding was slashed.

The diversion was necessary. All state operations had to be deeply cut during the crisis, including the courts. But now that voter-approved temporary tax increases and a gradually improving economy and housing market have slowed the cuts, the courts must be given at least a little room to breathe.

Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed budget provides some good news: The governor backed off plans to confiscate the minimal reserve funds that trial courts had saved to ensure that they remained solvent even amid continuing fiscal emergencies. Still, his budget does take an additional $200 million from the court system, which will force it to close courthouses, cut services, increase more fees and continue to delay courthouse construction. In Los Angeles County, that would mean further retrenchment from a modern court system that serves its people and a return to an outdated system with impossibly long freeway treks to, for example, obtain domestic

violence restraining orders or even to appear before a judge in a small claims or landlord-tenant dispute. It would mean that instead of safe, user-oriented facilities located near today's population centers, the public – already paying higher fines and fees for updated buildings – must continue to struggle with postwar-era courthouses offering reduced service hours and diminished assistance.

Of course, every program that was cut over the last five years is getting in line to have its funding restored. Or rather, they're jockeying for position at the front of the line. But Proposition 30, the tax hikes that voters approved in November, doesn't provide funding for restoring previous cuts. California's new supposed good budget times simply mean that for most programs there won't be additional cuts. But for courts, the slashing continues.

Courts are not just another program. They are a coequal branch of government, quite obviously essential to the delivery of justice, but essential as well to a developing economy and a civil society that can resolve disputes fairly and efficiently. The Legislature should keep that in mind as it makes adjustments to Brown's proposed budget.