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Budget deficit forces justice to sidetrack death penalty reform

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SACRAMENTO—California's chief justice told state lawmakers Tuesday that he had withdrawn a proposal to speed up reviews of death penalty cases.

Chief Justice Ronald George said he would not submit a proposed constitutional amendment this year to the state Legislature because of the state budget shortfall. He said there would be insufficient money for prosecutors, defense attorneys and judges.

"In view of the budget situation, I have asked that our proposal not be advanced at this time," George told a joint session of the Legislature during his annual state of the judiciary address.

He said he would wait for a more favorable opportunity.

Earlier this year, George proposed changing California's constitutional requirement that the state Supreme Court directly review all death sentences. He said the system was overwhelming the high court and was leading to years of delays for individual cases.

Death penalty appeals account for nearly a quarter of the roughly 120 opinions the high court issues each year.

George's proposal would have sent most

death sentence appeals to appellate courts in a bid to shorten what has become a 20-year process for individual cases.

"This has nothing to do with whether one is for or against the death penalty," George said in an interview after his speech. "It's a question about process."

Critics of the death penalty—including many lawmakers in California's Democratic-controlled Legislature—are content to see the judicial delays that have led to a near-moratorium on executions.

George urged lawmakers to propose ways to address the delay and the workload involving the backlog of death penalty cases.

While he offered to delay his death penalty proposal, George said the Legislature should boost funding for courthouse security and other improvements, while setting aside money to hire at least 50 judges.

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