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Paperwork Puts Strain on Court

LIKE BUSINESSMEN and federal agencies, the Oklahoma Supreme Court may be in danger of inundation by paperwork.

A revision of the state constitution about nine years ago gave the high court administrative supervision over district courts and later developments have multiplied the paperwork.

When funds for payment of district court salaries apparently ran short a year ago, the legislature provided a supplemental appropriation and enacted SB 53, which put restraints on court expenditures for furniture, equipment and extra help.

It also required Supreme Court approval of District Court budgets and expenditures, no small assignment. Because combined budget requests for the first half of 1976 exceeded anticipated funds by more than \$1 million, cutbacks had to be made. These were made after conferring with District Court boards.

Last November, the Supreme Court extended further the rules for approving claims and expenditures, increasing the workload of the chief justice, whose signature is required on them.

"We really brought this on ourselves," said Chief Justice Ben T. Williams. Businessmen might say that excessive paperwork is being handled at too high a level in the organizational structure.

Claims and vouchers are routed through the office of Marian Opala, court administrator, but final action is by the justices.

The Supreme Court has approximately 1,350 cases pending and expects nearly 1,000 more to be filed this year. In order to make appropriate assignments to the eight other

justices, the chief justice needs an acquaintanceship with each case.

A recent docket included 16 cases. Usually, briefs consist of 25 to 75 pages, but often are larger. One involving a number of motions and rehearings ran to 575 pages, prompting one lawyer to introduce himself to the court as being hired "to brief the briefs."

In spite of its heavy load, the Oklahoma Supreme Court consistently runs well above the national average in number of cases disposed of per justice by written opinions.

Some legislators have suggested that the Supreme Court back off from its recent rules, leaving more operational discretion to the district courts, but the high court "has not seen fit to give up some of the authority that we think we have."

Although stacks of documents and piles of briefs keep the chief justice at the capitol on weekends, early in the morning and late at night, Williams says he isn't complaining.

"A measure of supervision of expenditures in the individual counties is a worthwhile and desired governmental function and it is authorized by Article 7, Section 6, of the state constitution," the chief justice said. "That authority is being implemented by Supreme Court rules and I am the one designated to do it. I feel that I must, in good conscience, make an honest good faith effort to do it as efficiently as I'm able, as quickly as I can, and as honestly and fairly as I'm capable of doing."

There is no indication that the court's administrative responsibilities are impeding its handling of cases, but the court has a number of other duties that require time, also. Justice must never be made to wait on paperwork.