

Excerpt from "Under the State House Dome" by Tom Fahey, Union Leader, March 15:

Name a state agency that has more locations than Wal-Mart. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Broderick did last week — his court system.

“I think we have too many courts, that’s what I think,” he said at a breakfast meeting. If starting from scratch, he said he would not design a system with a superior court in every county.

But the main issue is the state’s 34 district courts, except for the state Liquor Commission’s 77 stores, the judicial system has more locations than any other state agency. That includes the Division of Motor Vehicles and Health and Human Services offices, Superior Court Chief Justice Robert Lynn said.

But when it comes time to close a courthouse, to move runs into headwinds from residents and officials who say their court is critical. Lawmakers blocked a move to save money by closing Milford, Colebrook, Claremont and Keene courts, then told Broderick to run them without providing extra funding.

“We don’t have the resources to keep them all going,” he said. “We cannot continue with the model we have on the ground.”

Broderick has appointed a panel to report by the end of the year on how to shape the court system for the future. It will be chaired by Eric Herr former chief operating officer of AutoDesk. Herr is also chair of the Judicial Council, served on the Citizen Commission on the Courts and has worked as a CASA volunteer.

Broderick would like to see more emphasis on technology, including electronic filing. That would allow a court worker in Lebanon or North Haverhill to work on case file backlogs in Brentwood or Nashua, he said.

He also envisions self-help centers staffed by paralegals, and a streamlined discovery process to cut down on hearings and paper.

Probate Chief Judge [David] King said he’s made changes in his 10 court rooms, too. One change has cut down on travel time for state prisoners. King said many would file to change their legal names, which would mean a day out of prison to appear in court. now that probate uses video-conference technology, meaning no field trip for prisoners, name change requests are way down, he said.

Lawyers in the state may want to polish their resumes. Three Superior court vacancies are being created by retirements of Justice James J. Barry, Kathleen a. McGuire and Philip P. Mangones. Lynn said that on August 1, a fourth justice, William J. Groff, will join them.

That will leave 18 judges doing the work of what Broderick pointed out one analysis says should be at least 25 judges.

Rapid turnover puts new judges in top slots in their counties quickly. In fact, with Mangones retirement, newly appointed Justice Marguerite Wageling will become the supervising, and only justice in Sullivan County.

Lynn joked that if the state really wants to close courts, it will take the equivalent of the federal base-closing commission, which presents up or down recommendations that can't be altered.