

Fire the computer planner

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The three branches of state government don't mess around much in each other's hiring and firing, which is appropriate. But here's an exception that was impossible to resist.

It involves the court system, populated by judges and others who take pride in their independence and, logically, their judgment. Their management skills are something else.

At the same time that the courts are furloughing workers, closing courtrooms one day a month and looking for even more ways to cut costs, the system's Administrative Office of the Courts is spending hundreds of millions of dollars on a computer system that still isn't completed after 10 years of trying.

In the first real review of this incredibly botched project, the state auditor came up with one of the most scathing criticisms in memory. Mismanagement and lack of oversight have put the computer system years behind schedule and more than a billion dollars over the original cost estimate of \$260 million.

The response from court administrators? Mostly excuses so lame and misleading that the state auditor had to refute them as part of the report.

Dismayed by the entire experience, two members of the legislative branch of government who had asked for the state audit have stepped over a line. In a letter last week to Chief Justice Tani Cantil-Sakauye, they said it was time to replace the court system's administrative officer, William Vickrey.

Not just tidy up the mess or shelve the

project, but fire the man in charge.

This was hardly subtle, but the time for niceties got passed about a billion dollars ago.

The credit for this bold step, in an environment in which hardly anybody ever gets fired for incompetence, goes to Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, who represents the Palos Verdes Peninsula, and to the chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, Assemblyman Ricardo Lara of South Gate.

Lowenthal took a gutsy step in her first year in the Assembly. She approached the Legislative Audit Committee and convinced its members that the courts' computer project was such an egregious mess that it warranted the attention of the state auditor. It certainly did.

The computers may never become an effective system. In a preliminary hookup connecting three courts, some judges said they like it, but some users say it is worse than what they had in the first place. It seems unclear what it would take to actually finish the job, or how effectively it would work in the end. Incredible as it may seem, a cost-benefit analysis has yet to be done.

Assemblywoman Lowenthal said the audit "highlights the kind of misplaced priorities and careless spending that make people distrust their government."

Exactly. And when this happens, it doesn't matter which branch of government fixes the problem, just so long as the problem gets fixed.