



CITY OF ATLANTA

City Auditor's Office
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Why We Did This Audit

The City Council passed resolution 10-R-0402 requesting an audit of the municipal court and the offices of solicitor and public defender. Council members cited concerns about court operations and citizen complaints since the abolishment of the traffic court and merger of the traffic court functions into the municipal court.

What We Recommended

The City Council should:

- Reduce the number of judges, solicitors, public defenders and case managers to align staffing with workload.

The chief judge should:

- Review and consider reducing the number of charges that require a court appearance as an alternative way to increase court efficiency and reduce costs.
- Stagger court session schedules to reduce wait time and the potential for overcrowding.

The court administrator should:

- Ensure that case managers enter cases assigned to the public defender into CourtView in order to accurately measure workload.
- Develop a process to review data entries in CourtView to ensure that information is complete and accurately entered into the system.
- Work with judges to review and establish meaningful disposition codes to better track case outcomes.

For more information regarding this report, please contact Eric Palmer at 404.330.6455 or epalmer@atlantaga.gov

Performance Audit:

Municipal Court Operations

What We Found

While the number of cases heard in municipal court remained flat over the last three fiscal years, the city increased the court's fiscal year 2011 budget to raise the number of courtrooms with scheduled cases from seven per day to nine. Based on our analyses, we estimate the court could handle its existing workload with four courtrooms; cutting the number of judges and court staff could save \$2.3 million annually.

The chief judge requested the budget increase to allow each judge to be assigned full-time to one courtroom, citing public convenience and increased traffic filings since January 2010 as justification. However, even with an uptick in the number of traffic and criminal tickets filed, case workload in the last six months of fiscal year 2010 required judges to spend only 28% of their time on the bench. Ticket filings overstate judicial workload because not all tickets require a court appearance, and many defendants either pay prior to their court appearance or fail to appear in court. We estimate that court workload would have to more than double to justify the use of nine courtrooms.

The judicial agencies requested additional positions in the fiscal year 2011 budget to staff nine courtrooms and help cover absences. During the last six months of fiscal year 2010, courtrooms were not staffed to the level the chief judge, city solicitor, and city public defender identified as preferable. Absences did not appear to affect the court's ability to process the caseload; we found no correlation between staffing and the percent of hearings reset. Based on our analysis, we conclude that reviving the use of pro hac judges – substitute judges to cover absences – does not appear to be warranted.

The court could better use its information systems to track workload and case outcomes. During the audit period, weekend and holiday work was not captured in CourtSmart or recorded in Kronos, the city's timekeeping system. Court staff said they do not check the accuracy of data entered into CourtView. We found some blank data fields and inconsistencies in how dispositions and status codes are used.