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Toal: The digital age is here for SC court system

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In the 12 years since becoming head of the state Supreme Court, Chief Justice Jean Toal has spent more than \$40 million in federal funds to change South Carolina's largely paper-based court system into an Internet-based digital system, complete with a server farm and a high-security backup system.

"The Internet was brand new 12 years ago," Toal told the General Assembly Wednesday in her yearly State of the Judiciary address, speaking of a time when most computer records were being kept either on paper files or on big mainframe computers.

Now, said Toal, South Carolina is recognized as a national model for using the Internet to handle court records. The system features a centralized database, high-speed connectivity to county court sites across in South Carolina, including all magistrates' offices and individual county Internet sites, as well as a standardized imaging system for putting paper documents into an automated system.

In previous years, Toal has talked about the gains, but this was her most comprehensive overview yet to the General Assembly of the system's modernization.

Toal also told lawmakers the judicial branch is a national pilot for using Internet civics classes for students promoted by now-retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The court brings middle and high school students in to hear oral arguments, streams video and presents briefs of cases argued. Using federal grants, it hired a master teacher to go into classrooms to show teachers how to use the O'Connor Internet tool, she said.

Last year, Toal and other judges had to battle to keep the Legislature from slashing the judiciary's \$37 million state budget. Such a cut would have crippled the courts, Toal said. Only after Toal enlisted major manufacturer Boeing and other business groups to lobby the Legislature did the General Assembly appropriate the full \$37 million.

"To the business community, the issue was clear — the ability of the state court system to function fairly and timely in resolving disputes is a highly important consideration in attracting new business to South Carolina," she said.

South Carolina's court system revenues provide \$109 million annually to the state government and \$26 million more to local governments, she said.

This year, Toal anticipates the Legislature will fully or nearly fully fund the judiciary.



Chief Justice Jean Toal gives the South Carolina annual state of the judiciary to joint sessions of legislature in the House of Representatives at the S.C. State House.

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Chief Justice Jean Toal uses a diagram to show the South Carolina court business model while speaking to joint session of legislature in the

Following her speech, Republicans and Democrats alike praised Toal.

"We're fortunate to have Jean Toal as chief justice," said House Speaker Bobby Harrell, R-Charleston. "She's done an incredible job of putting the court system online."

Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg, said Toal not only has done a great job with technology, "particularly with scarce state resources," but in also in the way she has made the court system more transparent and accessible to young people. "Unfortunately, for a lot of young people, particularly children of color, their notion of the courts is seeing somebody appear before the Bar who has been brought up on charges."

In an interview later, Toal told The State that although most of the state's court data are kept "in the cloud," or in the virtual Internet universe, there is a high-security "disaster backup" system at a place she declined to divulge for security reasons. She did say that Clemson University has a role in the backup system.

Besides \$37 million in state funds, the judiciary gets money from fees and the federal government for a total of about \$64 million annually. The judiciary includes more than 700 judges, from the magistrates' level to the Supreme Court.

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annual state of the judiciary at the S.C. State House.

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Chief Justice Jean Toal is greeted by members of the House of Representatives after giving the South Carolina annual state of the judiciary to joint sessions of legislature at the S.C. State House.

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