

Calif. death penalty bill stalls until next year

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A legislative committee on Thursday shelved a bill that would have asked voters to close California's death row and replace capital punishment with life prison terms.

State Sen. Loni Hancock, D-Berkeley, said she agreed to turn her SB490 into a two-year bill when she realized she didn't have the nine votes she needed to get her bill out of the 17-member Assembly Appropriations Committee to a vote by the full Assembly.

"This is going to be a process. This is a tough vote for a lot of people," Hancock said in a telephone interview. "The issue is not going away. There have been people across the state who are rallying to support it."

She said she and other proponents will keep lobbying lawmakers to approve the bill when it comes up again next year.

Hancock based her legislation in part on a recent study that found California has spent \$184 million a year on death penalty cases and incarceration, yet puts to death relatively few condemned inmates.

The 714 prisoners on the nation's most populous death row are more likely to die of old age.

Thursday's delay came as Gov. Jerry Brown voiced support for putting "deep, troublesome issues" like capital punishment to a vote of the people, as Hancock's bill proposes. Brown declined to comment directly on her bill.

"In general, I've said as a principle, that when we have deep, troublesome issues that create gridlock in the Legislature, going back to the people could be a way to break the gridlock," Brown said at a news conference he called to discuss a jobs creation proposal.

Brown, a Democrat, vetoed a death penalty bill in 1977 during his first stint as governor, though lawmakers overrode his veto. He enforced the state's death penalty law while he was state attorney general before he was elected to a third term as governor in November.