

Grand jury ignored

Local governments often reject panel's recommendations

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SANTA CRUZ — The Santa Cruz County Grand Jury has spoken, but is anyone listening?

In its 2002-03 report, the 19-member volunteer group made hundreds of recommendations to local governments.

Often, the response was "No," or some variation of "No."

For example:

"The county will not implement this recommendation because it is unreasonable."

"This finding is unclear."

"This recommendation is already in place."

The grand jury report addressed issues ranging from transportation to business growth and drug treatment. But in the follow-up, supervisors and council members often called the proposals well-intentioned but expensive, unfeasible, and in some cases, overly broad.

The responses to the grand jury report are to be released today.

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MARDI
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COUNTY
SUPERVISOR

Ignored

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A suggestion that the county needs to increase the number of slots for drug treatment met with the response that cuts in federal and state funding prevented the upgrade.

Not all of the recommendations were rebuffed: Suggestions to improve service on the Highway 17 Express bus were partially implemented.

The Regional Transportation Commission agreed with the grand jury that widening Highway 4 should be its highest priority — though that project has been high on the RTC's to-do list long before the report came out.

The grand jury asked county officials to respond to local government and business leaders' claims that it had a "hostile to business" reputation. Supervisor Mardi Wormhoudt called the inquiry "so vague, so general" that it defied responding.

Wormhoudt said jurors "do their job with a lot of resolve, but, with all due respect, they are not always terribly well-informed regarding issues on which they based their recommendations."

"Frankly," she added, "I cannot remember a time we have gotten a suggestion from the grand jury that no one had ever thought of before, that we could afford to do and was practical to implement."

The grand jury was not shocked by this year's reactions.

The responses are "fairly normal," said grand jury foreman Otis Johnson, recalling a 2001-2002 recommendation to consolidate administrations of school districts countywide. "That went over like a lead balloon," he said. "Now they're closing schools instead of consolidating them."

Still, he said, the jury ensures that local governments discuss pressing



issues that might otherwise be pushed aside.

"In some cases, yes, they are listening to us," said Johnson, a former paralegal who works for Home Depot as a flooring specialist. "A lot of times our recommendations don't get followed, and that's fine, as long as they are listening and getting it on the agenda."

Not to be confused with criminal grand juries, this group investigates area governments, is selected by a Superior Court judge and serves a one-year commitment. Its recommendations are nonbinding, including a suggestion that Santa Cruz or Capitola consider annexing unincorporated Live Oak, or for Live Oak to incorporate as a city.

Supervisor Jan Beautz, whose district includes Live Oak, doesn't expect to see such an annexation, or any "Welcome to the City of Live Oak"

signs, anytime soon.

Beautz said Live Oak is too small with too few businesses to support its own government, and that any city that tried to annex it would find it to be a financial drain.

The jury criticized Capitola for buying the Rispin Mansion and suggested it think about axing its Redevelopment Agency. The city government took issue with this, though City Manager Rich Hill said he supported the idea of the grand jury inquiries.

"When you have lay people looking over the shoulders of the government professionals, sometimes they are not going to understand what's going on. But is it important they ask the questions? Sure it is."

The grand jury asked the city of Santa Cruz to "look seriously" at an eastern access to UC Santa Cruz through the 600-acre Pogonip greenbelt property.

Among the grand jury's recommendations was an eastern access to UCSC through the Pogonip to ease traffic, which was rejected by the Santa Cruz City Council, and ways to improve bus service over Highway 17, which were partially acted upon.

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Sentinel

The grand jury's report last year helped to revive an old debate about eastern access.

But the Santa Cruz City Council in December declared that option dead. In the early 1990s, Mayor Scott Kennedy was on a joint committee involving the university and the city.

"It was mutually agreed upon (back then) to suspend active discussion" because of environmental impacts and prohibitive costs," he said.

But he said the jury deserves credit for trying to deal with "a whole universe" of pressing issues in a short time frame.

Copies of the grand jury report and the responses to it are available online at www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/grandjury.

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