

County Workers Fight for Job

Bob Johnson

In the face of massive budget cutbacks, the County employees union appears headed toward an aggressive program designed to save as many jobs as possible. More than 30 jobs have been eliminated from the County workforce by the Board of Supervisors in the last few weeks. Those cutbacks add up to less than a fourth of the reductions needed to make up the \$5.7 million shortfall in County funds that was discovered in an audit this fall. The decision on how to save the rest of the money is scheduled to be made next January, when as much as 10% of the County government could be eliminated.

Service Employees International Union Local 415 General Manager Jerry Zellhoefer told the *Express* that the union will emphasize the elimination of waste in government, a voluntary reduction in work hours and public pressure on tax delinquents as the alternative to laying off more people.

This fall the union asked County workers to give their views in a questionnaire on waste in government. The result is an eight-page listing of places where money might be saved without lowering the quality of work done by County government.

Apparently more than a few administrative level people have been liberal in their use of County cars recently, because workers in nearly every department listed that item as one place money could easily be saved.

Use of county time and money to attend classes — some of them having nothing to do with the job — is the second most frequent waste mentioned in the survey.

And some people in the Sheriff's Department think a few bucks could be saved if employees stopped using the teletype machine to do background checks on prospective dates.

The survey also names a few positions at the administrative level which could be eliminated without any serious effect on the work of County government.

In addition to pressing for the elimination of waste, the union will also promote a voluntary reduction program as an alternative to laying off people next month. So far the Board of Supervisors has supported the voluntary switch to part time work, Zellhoefer told the *Express*. In November, the Supes approved guidelines for the program and asked that department heads provide information on it to employees.

At least some administrative people, however, have apparently been less than enthusiastic about the idea. Zellhoefer told the *Express*, "I don't know if some top management people are trying to sabotage it by not letting people know what options there might be." He mentioned the Human Resources Agency and the Health Systems Agency as two departments where large sections of people had not been given information on the work reduction



Service Employees International Union Local 415 General Manager Jerry Zellhoefer (center) is pictured here with state AFL-CIO President John Henning and Santa Cruz Central Labor Council Secretary-Treasurer Vera Van Dusen. In the next few weeks, Local 415 will be looking for ways to avoid massive layoffs when the county lops five million dollars of the budget in January.

option.

But the work reduction plan has already had a major effect in at least one department. This week the Board approved closing the planning department for five weeks during the first half of next year. During those weeks, building inspectors will remain in the field and a few folks will be at the shop to answer calls, but the department will not be open for business.

The planning department managed to eliminate only three jobs — rather than 17 — by deciding to close down one week out of five. The idea was worked out through the cooperation of department managers, the union, shop stewards and the people who work there.

A final part of the union program to minimize the loss of jobs could be a public campaign on property tax delinquency. Santa Cruz County has one of the highest tax delinquency rates in the state. Some people cannot afford to pay their taxes on time, but many business property owners choose not to because they can receive a higher rate on their money than the penalty for being late on taxes.

The Seaside Company, owner of the Boardwalk, appears a likely candidate for a public campaign on this cash flow issue because it is the most substantial delinquent in the County.

The union is meeting the night of December 17 at the Emeline Street auditorium to discuss the job saving program.

While Local 415 thrashes out its program, County administrators are still wrestling with the depressing job of coming up with their recommendations of how to cut nearly \$5 million from the budget next month.

County Administrative Officer George Newell told the *Express* he does not know how many jobs would be lost under his department's recommended cutbacks. Newell said it will be at least a week before that recommendation is completed. □