

Local news

Grand Jury New county grand jury impaneled

By MAY WONG

Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — The civil grand jury, a watchdog of government agencies, would like the public to know it is back.

A new citizen panel has been impaneled for the 1997-98 year, and it is ready to do its job, foreman Tom Sprague said Monday. "There's a brand new grand jury in town, and we're here to serve the public," he said.

The 19-member group faces as daunting a task as any grand jury of the past, only this one must also emerge from the shadow of an unprecedented breakup in March of last year's grand jury. The disbandment — the first locally and possibly statewide — came after member after member resigned amid disagreements over internal procedures.

The breakup, experts said, reflected the difficulty facing many grand juries — do-

ing an intensive civic and largely voluntary job that entails at least 15 hours a week of work, the utmost confidentiality and the ability to work side-by-side with strangers.

It also spurred local court officials to change the grand jury selection process from a complete lottery system to a hybrid system of random selection and nomination by the judges. "That way, it'll be salted with leaders in the community," Superior Court Judge Robert Yonts had said at the time.

For the past two decades, Santa Cruz County was one of the few in the state that relied solely on the luck of the draw; most counties have a combination of a lottery and a process where interested persons could apply to serve.

This time around in Santa Cruz County, about six or eight nominees were thrown into a pool of 60 final candidates, which

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was narrowed from a group of 4,500 potential jurors. The final candidates were selected, interviewed, and then ranked by judges. Then from the top 30, 19 grand jurors were drawn randomly; the remaining 11 are the alternates.

So far, the new method seems to be working. The group has been working since July 1 and no problems have been reported.

"As far as I know they're doing fine," said Superior Court Judge Bill Kelsay. "I think they're going to work hard to stay cohesive."

Among the members are former grand jury members and forepersons, retired educators, nurses, a retired journalist, and a former investigator. One member also has 18 months experience serving on a federal grand jury, Sprague said.

"I feel this is going to be an ideal grand jury and it's because of the people," said Sprague, himself a former foreperson who served on the grand jury between 1987 and 1989.

"There is no one on that grand jury that has a hidden agenda and that's most important of all," he said.

Because the work and discussions of the civil grand jury are confidential, the disputes leading to last year's breakup remain unclear.

That suits the current members just fine.

"We're not concerning ourselves with last year's grand jury. Our concern is this year's grand jury," Sprague said.

Anyone who would like to bring an issue or complaint to the attention of the grand jury can call the jury office at 454-2099. Leave a message with your name and address, and a complaint form will be sent to you in the mail.