

Welfare

Supervisors raise welfare benefits

By LEE QUARNSTROM

Santa Cruz County supervisors voted unanimously Tuesday to raise general assistance (GA) welfare benefits by \$30 a month—an increase one supervisor said would be perceived as “too much by many, too little by others.”

The vote to accept the recommendation of Social Service Director David Singleton that the GA payments to be hiked to \$155 a month came after another acrimonious hearing on the controversial subject.

And, as Supervisor Cecil Smith noted as he made the motion to accept Singleton's recommendation, it was clear that many in the audience felt the increase should not be granted while others believed the raise was inadequate.

Prior to public testimony on the increase, Singleton told supervisors a bit about the GA

program, which is entirely financed by local, property tax funds. He said the increase from \$125 to \$155 a month was all he was recommending and that other changes in the program should be discussed at some other time. Singleton said that in August there were 88 recipients of GA, although the monthly average last year was about 125 persons. He said the cash payments are reimbursable, meaning that persons receiving GA benefits are supposed to repay the county when they are able.

GA recipients include many persons who are unable to work, the welfare director said, although those who are able to work are supposed to accept “reasonable offers of employment.”

He also said there were sufficient funds available to handle the \$30 increase but not

enough to cover costs of the \$195 monthly benefit level suggested by the county social service commission.

Prior to taking public testimony, the board heard Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat say she hoped the board was not planning to extend GA eligibility to students. She was told that that subject was not on the agenda and that Singleton's proposed benefit increase was the only subject slated for discussion.

When the hearing was opened to the public, a lawyer for WELAC — welfare education and legal assistance center — urged the board to key benefits to actual living costs in the county rather than to the amount of money available.

But other speakers urged supervisors either to require that able-bodied GA

recipients work to benefit the community or that eligibility requirements be tightened to make certain that able-bodied persons are not given GA benefits.

Once supervisors began to talk about the matter again, they were interrupted several times by members of the audience. At one point Mrs. Liddicoat chided a proponent of increased benefits by telling him, “I listened to you . . . now you listen to me.”

At the request of Supervisor Ed Borovatz, the motion to approve the \$30 increase was tied to a direction to Singleton aimed at reducing welfare fraud and abuses of the GA system. Borovatz asked that Singleton report back within 60 days on ways to make certain that fraud cases are prosecuted “in a timely manner” and on procedures the welfare department could use to minimize

the potential for abuse of the system.

Mrs. Liddicoat said she would support the motion, although she felt “there are young, able-bodied people who don't want to work” receiving GA payments.

Smith, in making the motion, said, “I refuse to believe there is anyone on this board who wants anybody to suffer . . . I know any increase will be criticized by many in our county. But this is something we can do today to do as much as possible for those persons who are truly in need.”

Before the unanimous vote, Supervisor Phil Baldwin said much of the opposition to GA is because it is financed by property taxes, which he branded as “a regressive source.” He urged that a progressive income tax be the source of money for such social service programs.