

R.R. S.C. - Charter

Pro-growth group behind charter move

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By BUD O'BRIEN

At least some of the mystery surrounding the group that has been drawing up a charter it hopes will become the instrument of government for Santa Cruz County has been dissipated.

It is now clear that a major force behind the secretive movement is an organization calling itself Public Trust. This organization, which is headquartered in Scotts Valley, has been active for the last year on behalf of what are generally labeled "conservative" causes in the county. Its spokesmen have consistently fought against such environmentalist and conservationist policies as are embodied in Measure J, the county's controversial growth management ordinance approved last June by the voters.

County supervisors received copies Thursday of a "report of the Citizens Charter Committee," which gives a summary of what the proposed charter will contain. That is the first solid information on what the charter drafters have been up to.

The very existence of the committee had been secret, at least to most people, until last week's Board of Supervisors meeting. At that meeting, the board was told of the committee's work by Vernon Berlin, a co-owner of radio station KSCO, who said he had agreed to act as "spokesman" for the group, although he denied any other connection with it.

Berlin said he had been asked to invite the supervisors to make suggestions on what they would like to see put into a county charter. But he would not identify any of the members of the group drawing up the charter except for R. W. Johnson, a Ben Lomond man who has been active in opposition to Measure J. Berlin did say the group represented a "responsible cross-section of the community" and included lawyers, businessmen and retired county officials, including former heads of departments and at least one judge.

The summary presented to supervisors Thursday is rather comprehensive, but its contents leave little doubt that

it reflects a conservative point of view and that its proponents hope to neutralize to the extent possible what they no doubt consider to be the undue influence of those environmentalist-anti-growth forces represented most articulately by Supervisor Gary Patton.

Patton's reaction to the summary, which he had only had time to scan, was one mostly of incredulity. Some of the proposals, he said, appeared to be plainly illegal; others "just plain unbelievable."

"I can't believe even this Board of Supervisors will put this on the ballot," Patton said.

It is the aim of the charter group to persuade the board to approve placing the charter on the ballot at the Nov. 6 election. No doubt they are placing their hopes on winning the sympathy of the so-called "conservative majority" — Chairman Dan Forbus, Marilyn Liddicoat and Pat Liberty. But the reaction so far has not been exactly one of enthusiasm. Forbus was in Sacramento Friday, but he had earlier expressed reservations about going to a

charter form of government, and left the impression that he had to be persuaded. Neither Mrs. Liberty nor Mrs. Liddicoat would commit themselves, either, but Mrs. Liddicoat said Friday she hadn't had time to read the summary. She was rather cool toward what she knew about it, however, saying that for one thing she didn't like the idea of enlarging the board to seven from the current five supervisors.

She added that "It (the charter) isn't a thing I'm going to spend a lot of time on" because she is now busy preparing for the budget sessions that are going to occupy the board during the last 10 days of this month.

In its report, the Citizens Charter Committee says it will have copies of the complete proposed charter by June 25. It says work on the charter began "early in 1979." In essence, the report says that the motive for making Santa Cruz a "charter county" rather than the "general law county" it now is is to get out from under state

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County charter changes sought

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control to the extent the law allows.

"Santa Cruz County has many problems," the report begins, "Many of these have arisen in recent years as a result of serious intrusions by the state of California into what should be local affairs. A general law county must accept these intrusions since it must abide by all state laws. A charter county is not so bound: its charter may constitutionally supersede state laws by its own provisions, as long as these are in fields not totally occupied and pre-empted by the state."

The proposed charter, says the report, contains 14 articles

"which cover a reorganization of the county into a more efficient, more manageable and less expensive form without denying essential services..."

In fact, the charter, if it is adopted, would radically change the system of government in this county. Among other things, it would abolish the office of County Administrative Officer, the effect of which would at least partly be to make the Board of Supervisors a quasi-administrative as well as a legislative body.

The charter would also abolish the separate offices of Auditor-Controller and Tax Collector and combine them into the office of Director of

Finance, which would be an elective office. The county operation would be divided into five major departments, each of which would report directly to the board (a consequence of abolishing the county executive's office).

The Board of Supervisors would be enlarged from its current five to seven members. Five of these would have to reside in the districts which they are elected to represent and two would be elected "at large." All supervisors would be voted on "at large" — that is, voters throughout the county would be allowed to vote for supervisors in each district, as well as for the two "at large" supervisors. Supervisors' terms of office would be extended to six from the current four years.

Other provisions of the proposed charter include ones that would:

—Make it more difficult to recall supervisors as well as make "requirements for legal challenges in recall elections" tighter "to prevent the misuse of the courts to delay the seating of replacement supervisors."

—Make the supervisors' job "full time" and increase their salaries from the "ridiculously low \$18,600" they now receive annually to \$24,000 (\$26,000 for the chairman).

—Require the establishment

of seven "standing committees," each chaired by a supervisor, to do the work now done by a myriad of advisory committees which would be abolished.

—Prescribe limitations on bonded indebtedness incurred after the charter becomes effective.

—Require that there be "equalized assessment of property" by which it means, among other things, that the mere sale of property could not be used as a reason for raising the assessment although that's what state law now requires. Charter proponents assert that "if the state law or rules of the state Board of Equalization prescribe otherwise, the charter may supersede them."

—Set up area planning commissions of three members each for each supervisorial district to replace the current single county Planning Commission. This would "serve the principle of increased local control." One of the seven standing committees, "the Standing Committee on Land use" would act as the county-wide Planning Commission, but all final authority would rest with the Board of Supervisors.

—Give the Board of Supervisors the power to "repeal any initiative of referendum ordinance enacted prior to the Charter Date which in the opinion of the County Counsel is unlawful or unconstitutional." Presumably, this provision is aimed at Measure J.

—Prohibits the county from passing any ordinance that would increase the cost of residential housing by any significant amount and says that "if the public wants open space or other lands for public use, the public ought to pay for them and not use the processes of force or extortion to acquire them by devious means." This is an apparent reference to county laws that require developers to donate land or money for parks, and to other state and county policies requiring other such land donations.

There are many other provisions, including one that enables the voters to make changes in the charter itself.

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