

Grand Jury

Jury Criticizes Sheriff; Foreman Censures Action

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Santa Cruz County Sheriff Al Noren has been sharply criticized for what the grand jury claims is a high turnover rate in his department caused by poor morale and mismanagement.

Noren also received a letter of censure from grand jury Foreman Jay Bartle for the sheriff's firing of reserve Sgt. Jim Eberhardt.

In the letter of censure to Noren, which accompanied the jury's final report that was released to the public at noon today, Bartle said the jury found validity to Eberhardt's complaint that he was fired seven days after Noren's re-election because of Eberhardt's political stance in

support of Walt Kubas in the election.

"The grand jury found it difficult to believe that an officer who had served for over seven years with apparent competency and efficiency, even receiving a commendation for his work during that period of time, should be summarily dismissed precisely seven days after your re-election. The timing alone of such personnel procedure in itself would have been cause for censure," Bartle wrote. Noren, as he had at the time of the firing, again Wednesday denied that Eberhardt was fired for political reasons, claiming the reserve's dismissal was based on poor attendance.

Noren produced a letter, dated December 1976, in which the then director of the

sheriff's reserve forces, informed Eberhardt that his termination was being considered for his failure to attend meetings.

Bartle's letter also censures Noren for what the final report attributes as a high turnover rate of sworn officers in the department due to "extremely low departmental morale, lack of support or encouragement, intimidation and a policy of favoritism."

Those conclusions, according to the report, were drawn from interviews with members of the department, whom, Bartle wrote, "without exception cited the low salaries as only the secondary factor."

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Noting that 42 deputies have left the department during the 2½ years since Noren's re-election, the report says:

"It was of significance that all the men interviewed stressed again and again the single fact that they had had pride when they first entered on their careers as law enforcement officers, how that pride had slowly but surely been eroded through lack of support and 'mismanagement,' and how the admittedly low pay was not the determining factor in their resignations or contemplated resignations.

The report also says that deputies complained of being arbitrarily assigned or transferred to other departments without explanation, "to the extent that many men considered these transfers to be demotions instead of the in-service, inter-departmental training they were supposed to be."

Deputies reportedly also said some such transfers came after outstanding work by the officers and were "for the purpose of deflecting media publicity away from the officer and to credit the sheriff alone."

Noren held to his claim that the turnover rate is primarily the result of low pay. "Since the settlement of the contract (last month), I haven't heard any griping," he said.

He also attributed some of the turnover to deputies who had been reserves in other counties, such as Santa Clara, who took advantage of openings here to receive their law enforcement training. "Once they got their certificates they went home."

Noren added the report failed to mention that he publicly announced a study of the turnover rate last year. A survey, he said, was done by Sgt. Mickey Aluffi, "but I doubt seriously that they ever contacted Aluffi."

Noren denied the accusation of an "in group" getting preferential treatment. All promotions, he said, are based on a civil service list. "So far I have always promoted the top man on the list," he said. Transfers, he said, are made to fill needs, though he added that the desires of the men are an important factor. "If there is a vacancy, for example at the jail, we have to fill it."

Noren said that Bartle explained in his letter of censure that more specific details of the charges would be spelled out in the final report. He termed the report "generalizations."

Noren attributes the criticism also to politics. "I think this year the politics (of the grand jury) are on the liberal side — opposite my stance," he said.