

Report blasts supervisors

Grand Jury

The Santa Cruz County grand jury accuses the board of failing to develop much-needed affordable housing and urges a lawsuit.

By David L. Beck
Mercury News

A Santa Cruz County grand jury report blames many of the county's problems on the lack of affordable housing and urges the district attorney to sue the board of supervisors over its failure to bring the county into compliance with state law. That failure goes back to at least 1994 and has cost the county millions of dollars in state funds, the report says.

The report in effect accuses the supervisors of speaking out of both sides of their mouths on the housing issue, and finds their motivation in a

dedication to the no-growth philosophy that has dominated local politics for more than two decades.

"Urban services boundaries in the county have historically been determined by anti-growth actions directed by elected officials rather than based on suitability of location of housing development," the grand jury notes.

The report, which will be released this morning, is an annual requirement under the California Constitution. Each county's 19-member civil

See **REPORT**, Page 4B

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Jury urges 1 school district for Santa Cruz County

Santa Cruz County should fold all 10 of its school districts into one to streamline staff, better manage enrollment, ensure uniform policies and facilitate grant applications, the county grand jury recommends.

The county has about 39,000 students in public schools, slightly more than half of them in one district, Pajaro Valley Unified. Four districts consist of a single school each.

John Casey, the Pajaro superintendent, thinks countywide unifica-

tion is unlikely — "too diverse ... too many areas of local interest" — and says that even if it could happen, it shouldn't.

A district that stretches from northern Monterey County to the San Mateo County line is more than can "reasonably" be overseen by one superintendent, he said.

Other grand jury findings and recommendations:

■ The county should keep young

See **JURY**, Page 4B

REPORT | Panel blames board for lack of housing

Continued from Page 1B

grand jury is free to investigate whatever it likes, although the presiding judge can request certain investigations. This year, Judge Arthur C. Danner asked the jurors specifically to look into juvenile hall and teen drug and alcohol use and programs.

Supervisors received copies of the report earlier this week. They have 60 days to reply. Supervisors and county officials were in budget hearings Wednesday and were not available for response.

Under state law, a city or county's general plan "housing element" must be certified by the California Department of Housing and Community Development as being in compliance with legal requirements. Santa Cruz County's isn't, a situation for which the grand jury blames the board of supervisors "as the responsible executives."

Lack of compliance makes the county ineligible for "millions of dollars per year in state funding" for low-income housing, first-time home-buyer assistance, infrastructure improvements and economic development. And this in a county where only 6.9 percent of the available homes are affordable to families with a median income of \$65,500.

That means, the report notes, that workers must commute long distances over deteriorating roads. "Community development block grant funding from the state that would help the situation has been denied, due to the supervisors' decision not to comply with affordable housing laws."

Despite "numerous options for relieving the affordable housing situation" without compromising quality of life, the board has done nothing, the report says.

"Instead, the supervisors, while publicly voicing support for affordable housing, have ... directed further studies, directed additional analysis,

requested additional reports, directed economic modeling, directed exploration of possibilities and routinely deferred considerations to future dates — often repeatedly — until they eventually failed to appear on subsequent agendas."

The supervisors' failure even strains public restrooms, the report says, thanks to the heavy use they get from the unemployed and the working homeless.

The grand jury recommends that the supervisors "implement the options identified" in an affordable housing plan they were given in November by the chief administrative officer, the planning director and the redevelopment director. They should also publicize what the laws require and the consequences of their own failure.

And it calls for a lawsuit to force the supervisors' hands — "to ensure the ... Board of Supervisors breaks with their history of willfully failing to comply with duties and obligations required of them by law." That suit could be brought by the district attorney, the state attorney general or as a class action.

The report also criticizes the local University of California campus for "imposing an additional burden on an already critical situation" with inadequate on-campus housing. UC-Santa Cruz must "do more to build its fair share of student housing" and "limit the student population to accurately reflect the current housing situation."

University officials, who last year took over the downtown Holiday Inn for student housing, say their percentage of on-campus housing is the highest in the system. The plan is for the campus to grow to 15,000 students from its current level of 12,000-plus.

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JURY | Report addresses schools, juvenile hall

Continued from Page 1B

offenders in juvenile hall longer. "The Probation Division appears more interested in emptying juvenile hall than in successfully rehabilitating juvenile repeat offenders," the report charges.

■ The county should start planning for a new, more centrally located juvenile hall, and meanwhile fix up the old one, particularly its heating and air conditioning. Juvenile hall is in Felton.

■ Allegations that Santa Cruz illegally turned over a tideland to the Seaside Com-

pany in 1934 are "without merit," although the report notes that the city could do more to explain to the public what actually happened. The site has long been a boardwalk parking lot.

■ The county jail is able to hold 249 inmates and has been approved for an upgrade to 311. The average monthly population in 2001 was 348. "Seriously overcrowded," the report notes.

The report also examines long-term care for seniors and mental health services for the homeless.

— David L. Beck