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Cabrillo Times & Green Sheet, Thursday, January 26, 1978—15

Grand Jury report hits supervisors

By JOAN KLINGENBERG

Massive budget cuts made by Santa Cruz County supervisors in June have incited the wrath of the county Grand Jury.

"The methods employed in setting the final budget generated controversies unwarranted by the actual monies saved or number of positions cut," the government committee of the Grand Jury states in an interim report made public yesterday.

The report has been called "politically-oriented" by supervisors' chairman Ed Borovatz. And supervisor Phil Baldwin tagged it as "absurd" and "absolutely irresponsible."

However, Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat, the only supervisor who was contacted by the Grand Jury to answer questions about the budget process, called the report "brilliant."

"I think they're absolutely right," said Mrs. Liddicoat this morning.

"I think it was a dumb way to go about cutting the budget," she added. However, she said she thought the jurors were being critical of the entire board of supervisors, not just the majority of the board represented by Baldwin, Borovatz and Gary Patton.

After reading the report yesterday, an angry Borovatz maintained it had been instigated by Mrs. Liddicoat.

"The Grand Jury has not interviewed any of the other supervisors (about this matter). They made these suppositions based on Marilyn's comments and I think it is unfair, especially since major cuts in the budget are so hard to do that most public agencies won't even do it," Borovatz said.

He said he had specifically asked Grand Jury Foreman Ed Hall that the entire board be involved in any investigations into board of supervisors' matters.

In the report, jurors say that "after the budget sessions, even when presented with additional evidence supporting the vital need for a position or funding item and often with an alternative means to make the monetary cuts, the board of supervisors did not yield . . .

... some department heads felt the board of supervisors was so unresponsive that their course was litigation."

The report says the Grand Jury found no

evidence of any Brown Act violations during budget hearings but adds:

"However, voting on long, complex motions without receiving input from department heads or seeming to disregard such input when given, led many people to believe that some supervisors had closed minds or had already made up their minds individually.

"Of the 25 positions that were initially cut, most could be viewed as a form of retribution against the individual holding that position for his or her political activity or leanings . . . or retribution against the department head, or as an attempt to hinder a departmental function for political rather than budgetary reasons.

"Allegations of Brown Act violations and political retribution led to a loss in public confidence which is so vital. Although making budget reductions will always give rise to controversy, the board of supervisors must be especially careful to avoid the appearance of any impropriety."

Baldwin said the report contained "an incredible number of unfounded allegations" based on "guessing" by Grand Jury members.

He added the Grand Jury "is made up of an extremist element, not at all representative of the public."

The report "is a purely political statement," said Baldwin.

Both he and Borovatz said the criteria used by the board to make the budget cuts were "consistently" applied to every department.

They maintained the budget cuts have not resulted in a loss of services or money to county residents.

The supervisors also responded to a statement in the report which says "the public's exposure to the media coverage and subsequent awareness of the conflict over the budget seems to have eroded public confidence in county government."

Baldwin called the statement "absurd." Borovatz said he did not think the supervisors had received a bad image through press coverage of the budget hearings.

"I think this is what the people must really decide . . . if they want taxes to go down, then we are going to have to make these hard decisions," Borovatz commented.