

Grand jury appeals for voting reforms

6-10-84
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SANTA CRUZ — Legislation to reform the state's voting laws is needed, the county grand jury has recommended in its annual report, released Friday.

The revisions are contained in a lengthy study on voting irregularities investigated by the grand jury in 1983-84, which led a coalition of 22 conservatives to contest the results of the November Santa Cruz City Council election in court.

After a 3½-month-long trial, Superior Court Judge Harry Brauer upheld the election. However, that decision will likely be appealed. Attorney Tim Morgan, who represented the 22 conservatives in the lawsuit, is mounting a fund-raising campaign to take the issue up to the state appellate court.

The grand jury, under the leadership of foreman Julius Defosset, took a sweeping look at other areas, besides voter irregularities.

The report recommends far-reaching changes in the county Planning Department, San Lorenzo Valley Water District, Scotts Valley city government, farm labor camps, the criminal justice system and Branciforte Fire District, among other things.

In terms of voting laws, the grand jury has suggested seven areas of state reform.

They are: rewrite the laws on residency to make them uniform; begin a "positive purge" of voting rolls; tighten the requirements under which deputy registrars sign up new voters; require absentee voters to state a bona fide reason for requesting an absentee ballot; require new voters to

verify their citizenship; require positive identification of new registrants; and set up a clearing house in Sacramento to computerize voting rolls statewide.

Alameda County has a pilot project for the positive purge system. According to County Clerk Richard Bedal, the purge would put the onus on voters to remain on the voting rolls.

It works this way: Any voter who fails to go to the polls would submit a card with his or her signature and address before the next election. Otherwise, the name would be dropped from the rolls.

The report described how the grand jury began the voting probe, saying that with the full approval of the district attorney's

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office, it uncovered enough information to begin noting which voters would be challenged. This was done by making a mark on the roster books.

The county counsel "entered the picture," the report said, and stopped the grand jury's action.

"At no time was the grand jury told it didn't have enough evidence, as has been reported," the report emphatically states.

"Allegations by certain political groups in the city that the grand jury had taken sides in the investigation were totally unfounded," it said.

The grand jury "does not have political bias and personal political objectives are not a governing factor in final recommendations."

Initially the grand jury wanted to challenge 1,700 voters at the UCSC precincts. Later that figure proved to be high, as only 472 voters were found to have voted irregularly.

In a subsequent investigation, the grand jury looked into two areas of "citizen speculation" and discovered no evidence of "bus loads of students" being brought in to vote in local elections, or vast numbers of business people voting at their businesses instead of their homes. Only seven instances of that were uncovered.

The 108-page grand jury report discusses a number of other areas of government, including:

County Planning Department

"There appears to be inordinate delays in getting a workable master plan activated that will provide for faster, more efficient service to the citizens of Santa Cruz County" the grand jury said.

"Complaints directed at the Planning Department continue to reach the grand jury in greatly increasing numbers. Witnesses interviewed relate almost unbelievable experiences in their long and arduous attempts to work through the system," the report said.

"Perhaps it is the system that needs a complete overhaul," it said.

The grand jury recommends the supervisors direct the Planning Commission to review existing ordinances to "simplify them and make them understandable and enforceable."

Also, the board should "scrutinize management efficiency . . . and take whatever steps are necessary to make the department more responsive to the public it serves."

San Lorenzo Valley Water District

In response to a citizen complaint, the Grand Jury investigated "possible mismanagement on the part of the San Lorenzo Valley Water District Board."

The SLVWD has been charged with finding a solution to the pollution problem in the Valley. After lengthy studies, the district has moved toward two answers — a small sewer system for Class 1 homes (the ones with the most severe problems) and on-site solutions for Class 2 homes (those where septic tanks are acceptable).

It recommends, "Realistic attention must be paid to existing conditions and the needs of the population as a whole. Future priorities should be health, cost and environment in that order."

In the future, "thorough investigations of all outside companies or agencies should be initiated prior to their being considered as consultants." This is a reference to J. M. Montgomery Co., the firm which did the initial studies for SLVWD. Generally it is well-regarded.

In a related matter, the grand jury said, "The San Lorenzo River is recognized as a highly polluted source for drinking water and body contact recreation."

The grand jury said "well above 80 percent of the time, fecal coli levels exceeded the state (acceptable) levels. . . ."

And, the grand jury said that despite Environmental Protection Agency assurances that the levels of another substance, trihalomethane, which at high levels is linked to cancer, are within acceptable levels, it would consider "completely replacing the the San Lorenzo River as a source of drinking water."

Santa Cruz Mayor John Laird replied that the city no longer uses the Felton diversion dam and Tait collector, both of which draw water from the San Lorenzo River, "and would require significant additional water development by the city. It could conceivably require a project as large as the Zayante Dam.

"It would cost the taxpayers millions of dollars, in addition to the money we would have to have to develop water in the future anyway," Laird said.

He said he would only support going to an alternate source of water if "the state Department of Health tells us the quality is inadequate and the SLVWD is unable to deal with the problems in the Valley. This once again, emphasizes the need for the Valley to clean up its sewage problem."

Scotts Valley

The grand jury suggests the city filing system be updated and a workable numerical system be implemented to keep track of planning projects.

"The grand jury noted instances where proposed projects have languished for over two years without resolution," the report said. "At present, the office files have a confusing numerical system . . . and the city manager/city clerk is apparently untrained in its operation."

It also suggests security to city files be tightened and "consistently enforced."

Farm labor camps

The grand jury investigated Murphy's Camp, where a fire in 1982 left 22 homeless and two dead. It also visited the San Andreas labor camp.

Because of ongoing sanitation and health problems — like broken windows, rodent infestations and substandard water — the grand jury recommends the county hire an additional health inspector.

Also, it suggests the board adopt a resolution to prohibit paying rent or occupying a home deemed dangerous.

Criminal justice

Santa Cruz County has 15.2 percent fewer law enforcement officers than the average in the state, yet handles 33 percent more arrests. The crime rate, which is 12.3 percent above the average, suggests the county "has dedicated and hard-working law enforcement agencies which need citizen support."

As to the county's jails, the grand jury recommends the Front Street facility be shut down once the new addition to the Water Street jail is completed.

Branciforte Fire District

The grand jury chastized the Board of Directors' reorganization plan, saying it should be "carefully studied."

That plan resulted in the ouster of a long-time assistant fire chief, who later filed a lawsuit. Subsequently, the fire chief announced his intention to retire.

As in its previous report on the fire district, the grand jury suggested job descriptions be developed and evaluations be initiated.