Supervisors' salary plan under fire

By STEVE SHENDER
Sentinel Staff Writer

SANTA CRUZ — County supervisors' tentative approval of a plan to permanently tie their salaries to Superior Court judges' pay has come under fire from the general manager of the county's largest employee union.

Jerry Zellhoefer, general manager of Service Employees International Union Local 415, which represents 1,240 county workers, has called the board's action "ironic and contradictory" at a time when the county faces a possible $500,000 budget deficit and county officials complain about being fiscally beholden to the state.

Supervisors, who currently make $28,188 annually, last week voted 3-2 to tie their pay to a percentage of Superior Court judges' salaries. Under the pay-formula plan, which is slated for final approval as a consent agenda item Tuesday, board salaries would be pegged at 40 percent of judges' pay starting in February and would rise to 45 percent of jurists' pay in mid-June.

Superior Court judges currently make $77,000 annually.

Overall, the new pay formula would result in a 23-percent pay increase for supervisors by June, raising their salaries to $34,360 a year. In the future, under the pay formula, supervisors' pay would be automatically increased whenever the state Legislature approved a raise for judges.

In a letter to Board Chairman Gary Patton and his fellow supervisors, Zellhoefer said the board's pay plan had sparked "considerable discussion" among county employees — who this fall settled with the county for 5- to 18-percent pay increases, spread over two years. (The two-year contract's largest percentage increases went to the county's lowest-paid workers.)

Zellhoefer wrote that in view of County Administrative Officer George Newell's predictions that the county could face a budget deficit of $500,000 or more during the current fiscal year, "it would appear reasonable that fiscal caution should be an underlying concern in every budget action through the remainder of this year."

The union official said it was "ironic and contradictory that while in an era when so much has been said about the negative aspects of being fiscally tied to the state Legislature and the governor, that your board wishes to make another fiscal commitment which will be determined by the decisions of the Legislature and the governor."