

RRSC Charter

New group seeks county system changes

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By BUD O'BRIEN

There is a movement afoot to change the way Santa Cruz County government operates.

If the people involved in the movement have their way, the change will consist of converting the county from a "general law" to a "charter" county, the basic thrust of which would be to allow the county more freedom to run its own affairs.

However, the people behind this movement are not yet ready to reveal who they are. The movement was publicly acknowledged for the first time Tuesday afternoon when Vernon Berlin, a Santa Cruz radio station operator, revealed its existence in a presentation to the Board of Supervisors.

Berlin said he had agreed to act as spokesman for the group that is drawing up a charter that it hopes will become the county's governing document. But he said he was not a part of the group, which calls itself the Citizens Charter Committee, and he said he was not at liberty to

identify the members. He said he believed they had approached him to be spokesman because he had been a member of the Grand Jury in 1962 that proposed making Santa Cruz a charter county.

Berlin did say the committee was composed of "a responsible cross-section of the community," including lawyers, businessmen and former county executives. Berlin said the group wanted him to solicit suggestions from the supervisors and that was why he was before them Tuesday.

It was obvious from the reaction of Supervisor Gary Patton, that he has his own ideas of the motives of the mysterious Citizens Charter Committee.

"I'd be happy to participate," the supervisor who represents part of Santa Cruz and the North Coast area said, if he knew who the people who were organizing the effort were. "Would you tell us who they are?" he asked Berlin.

Berlin refused, except to acknowledge that one of them

is R.W. Johnson, a Ben Lomond resident who has been one of the most vociferous foes of Measure J, the growth management program approved by the voters last June. But Berlin insisted that the committee represented a "fair cross-section of the community."

Patton, who is not only the author of Measure J but the most persistent board foe of development outside the county's urban areas, made it clear, however, that he considered the committee's effort the latest manifestation of a move by special interests to gain control of county government.

"I predict it's a set-up to deprive the people of this county of self-government," Patton said.

What he was referring to was the possibility of having "at-large" elections of county supervisors under a "charter county" set-up. A "general law" county, which Santa Cruz now is, must hold elections by district in which voters in each district are re-

stricted to voting only for candidates to represent that district. In "at large" elections, all candidates run county-wide, although the candidates might have to reside in the district they are elected to represent.

Patton's district, for example, includes most of the UC-Santa Cruz area, and UCSC voters agree almost unanimously with Patton's liberal and environmentalist-oriented political philosophy. At large voting could dilute the influence of this "voting bloc" considerably.

Supervisor Chris Matthews joined Patton in questioning Berlin closely about the method of operation chosen by the "committee."

"I think they should be publicly asking people for input," he said. "Do they have housewives? Mexican-Americans? Farmers? Unemployed? Who do they have?"

Berlin said the group would come before the board in June and once again insisted that it "does not favor any special group." "They have put in

several hundred hours" working on a charter, Berlin said.

"My main concern is the secrecy," Matthews said.

Berlin replied that the people will ultimately get to vote on the charter issue. He said the committee hopes to have a draft before the board next month and is aiming to get the issue on the ballot at the Nov. 6 election.

With some bitterness, Patton said, "I predict the board will approve it 3-2," an obvious reference to the three (conservative) to two (liberal) split on the board.

This prompted Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat, who had listened to Berlin's presentation in silence, to wonder how Patton could speak for Matthews, who, she said, has already come to be known to some as "Mr. Patton's puppet."

This prompted Matthews to remark, that, while he didn't believe he was anyone's puppet, "I'd rather be the puppet of an ally than the puppet of developers."

After his exchange with supervisors, Berlin passed around to reporters a release headed, "To the people of Santa Cruz County." This release began with the statement that "the continual war between minorities in Santa Cruz County should stop."

It went on to suggest that one of the solutions to that problem would be to "present to the people of Santa Cruz County a charter designed to correct the abuses of constitutional rights and freedom that have occurred and are continuing." It does not specify what these "abuses" are.

The release goes on to try to explain why the committee has chosen to work in secrecy.

"This is a very difficult job on a tight time schedule," the release says. "The committee must remain free to complete its work, but it does want input from the public before the final documents are printed. That is why a spokesman has been selected."

Berlin, who is co-owner

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(with the McPherson family who also own the Santa Cruz Sentinel) of radio station KSCO, said he had agreed to receive written suggestions from citizens and pass them along to the committee.

"While they cannot be (personally) answered," Berlin said, "I assume they will be given careful consideration. You will see the result at the end of June."