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Over Budget Cuts

Grand Jury Rips Board Bickering

By PAUL BEATTY

Sentinel Staff Writer

Last year's budget cuts by the county Board of Supervisors "generated controversies unwarranted by the actual monies saved, or number of positions cut," according to a Santa Cruz County Grand Jury report issued Tuesday afternoon.

Board Chairman Ed Borovatz called the single-issue report on the budget process "more politically-motivated than factually-oriented" and said that the only supervisor interviewed to by the grand jury was Supervisor Marilyn Liddicoat, an outspoken critic of the board majority's budget cuts.

A check by the press revealed that Liddicoat was the only supervisor to talk to the grand jury about the budget, and her initial response to the report was, "This is really exciting."

The grand jury said that while it "found no evidence of Brown Act violations (California's open meeting law)" it believed that "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."

Liddicoat was asked if she believed the board majority of Borovatz, Gary Patton and Phil Baldwin did make agreements prior to going to public hearing, and she answered, "Absolutely."

She said that Borovatz had approached her a number of times asking for concurrence on certain matters and told her that he had first received answers from other supervisors on the issue and that "morally, that is a violation of the Brown Act."

The board majority, at budget time and following, individually denied making any deals prior to hearings, with its three members saying the public record shows voting splits in all directions.

The jury took the board to task for cutting administrative assistants in a couple of departments, stating the cuts did not result in true money savings.

Noted were the elimination of an administrative assistant in the assessor's office and the deputy public administrator's position in the district attorney's office. The latter position has been reinstated.

The jury said the board should have conferred with department heads prior to designating such cuts.

Borovatz responded, "We had to cut it line by line (designate the exact position to be cut) because if we had just told the department heads to cut out a certain amount, it would have been the lowest positions that were cut."

The jury also stated, "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/her political activity or leanings, or retribution against the department head, or as an attempt to hinder a departmen-

tal 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 (and) although making budget reductions will always give rise to controversy, the board must be especially careful to avoid the appearance of any impropriety," the report advised.

Borovatz said, "I realize these are heavy charges, but they are opinions stated as facts, without supporting data."

He repeated, "The grand jury did not even approach other supervisors (than Liddicoat), they did not even ask anything from us—these are just suppositions from Marilyn's (Liddicoat) comments."

Liddicoat told the press, "If they (grand jury) didn't talk to any other supervisor, I'm more disturbed than you," but reaffirmed, "I'm glad someone else is coming out complaining about what I'm complaining about."

The report said, "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."

Borovatz said he did not believe there was "bad press" coming out of the stormy budget sessions, and Liddicoat commented, "I thought the media told it like it was."

Further comments from the report:

"One of the most important results of the June budget sessions is the negative effect on the morale of county employees disproportionate to the monies and the number of positions deleted from the budget."

"The initial drop in morale stemmed from county employees' personal knowledge of those who had their positions deleted."

"Subsequent appeals by department heads, litigation, appeals to the civil service commission, rumors of political retribution and alleged Brown Act violations forced employee morale even lower."

"This low morale, with which county government cannot possibly run smoothly and efficiently, has caused a loss of faith in county government and has caused many employees to question their future place in county government."

"Some of the current high attrition rate of county employees, 23.4 percent annually as of September, is attributable to this low morale," the report states.

The citizens jury stated, "The grand jury can offer no panacea, but recommends that the board accept its concern for the areas of consideration addressed in this report" stating the board should include in its considerations the level of service desired, the real savings in in budget trimming and the effect on efficiency of the county government.

Borovatz final comment was, "We brought the taxes down, and the citizens are going to have to stand behind the people who made the cuts, or no future board will risk doing it again."