

D.A. ruling leaves some 'disgusted'

By KATHY KREIGER
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — Sheriff-Coroner Al Noren had harsh words to say Wednesday about the Board of Supervisors' exoneration of District Attorney Art Danner.

"I think the board majority fell flat on their asses — or faces," said Noren, who has long been known as no friend of Danner's.

His sentiments were echoed throughout the six floors of the county government building Wednesday. County employees from the top on down said they were "disgusted and discouraged" by the supervisors' decision, but none save Noren was willing to talk on the record. Noren is retiring this month.



Noren

At issue is an audit report critical of Danner for not following county rules.

Specifically, the auditor questioned Danner's putting an employee on paid leave for four months while charges of drug use were investigated, Danner's authorization of payment of a car allowance to an employee who drove a county car, and other matters. The auditor suggested that Danner should be forced to repay \$25,000 that was improperly spent.

Danner dismissed the auditor's criticisms as a "hyper-technical reading" of county policies and said those policies conflicted with state laws and his constitutional authority to investigate and prosecute crime.

Instead of reprimanding Danner for breaking the

Please see RULING — A5

Ruling

Continued from Page A1

rules, the supervisors ultimately decided they would take a look at their rules.

"Maybe I'm not too bright, but it seems to me if I could understand the rules, anyone could," said Noren.

"The board is saying, 'OK, to hell with our rules. But just don't do it again,'" Noren said. "... The rules are not written just for department heads. They're meant for all employees. That's of paramount importance.

"I expect my people to follow the rules and policies and I hold them accountable. Likewise, the board has the obligation to oversee them. I think the board majority fell flat

on their asses, or faces."

Danner had argued that he was in a difficult and unique situation when a prosecutor who handled drug cases told him she had been forced to use drugs by an abusive boyfriend. Her access to county crime records and ongoing investigations created a sensitive situation that Danner said was best handled by sending her home with pay for four months.

Noren said he's had to fire employees, too.

And for the most part, he said, he's been able to investigate those cases within the county's five-day limit. In one case that took longer, Noren said, he went through channels to get an extension.

The sheriff said he has not read

the specific reports involved. But he grasps the principles.

"I thought the arguments are specious. I don't give my people a car and a car allowance," he said, referring to the auditor's criticism of Danner for trying to boost his chief inspector's salary by giving him a county car while also paying him a salary that includes the equivalent of a \$320-per-month car allowance.

"And the guy lives in San Mateo County. Why have red lights and an emergency vehicle?" Noren said. "Do the (other) inspectors have emergency vehicles? No, they don't. And they live in this county."

Asked how often the chief inspector has shown up at a crime

scene, Noren replied, "Ask my people. Nobody knows. Unless he does it under cover."

Noren dismissed suggestions that letting Danner off scot-free would encourage other county elected officials to feel they could break the rules with impunity. The sheriff is close to three other long-time county elected officials: Treasurer-Tax Collector Bill Murphy, Auditor-Controller Gary Knutson, and Clerk-Recorder Richard Bedal.

"To a man, we all follow the rules," Noren said. "They're not going to set out to circumvent them because of this."

Like Supervisor Gary Patton, who voted against the majority on the Danner matter, the sheriff predicted that neither the board nor

the county has seen the end of the matter.

Patton said Wednesday that if the rest of the board had put off its decision for a week, they would have heard exactly the dissatisfaction that surfaced.

"If they had taken the time, they

would have heard that, too. Not from the people with the political signs (supporting Danner), but from county employees who do follow these rules," Patton said. "... They don't believe these should be violated. And they wanted the board to say 'This wasn't right.'