

Grand jury has great power — and no power

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By BARBARA BURKLO
Sentinel Staff Writer

No instant utopia is created by recommendations from a grand jury.

But Hulda McLean, foreman of the Santa Cruz County Grand Jury for 1981-82, defends the basic need for such a body.

"The grand jury has historically been criticized for three things," she says.

"First, the secrecy of its informative sources; second, the fact that it is expensive, and third, the fact that the members are plain people — are not experts who can make judgments."

The secrecy, she says, is a large measure of the grand jury's power.

She agrees that it is expensive.

"During our year, more than half of our budget went to hiring experts. In my opinion, the grand jury doesn't need so much money for experts — it could choose more stringently the experts they do get."

And, among the "plain people", she says there usually are experts.

"Every grand jury has its own experts on it," she says, "for instance, on ours we had a fireman, a policeman and a management consultant."

The grand jury, as it now stands, has a great deal of power — and no power at all.

Its power, according to the veteran public servant, comes from its knowledge, from the publicity surrounding its recommendations and from its known desire to help county departments do their work.

Some believe the body should have more power — perhaps to enforce its recommendations.

"It has no power to tell anyone to do anything," McLean says, "and this is as it should be."

"Remember, there are good grand juries and bad grand juries — too much power might be abused."

Thus, in the unlikely possibility that an

ill-chosen group of incompetents is brought in, and they had the clout to enforce their recommendations, the results could be disastrous.

Fear is an element that comes into play.

"There is an unfounded, paranoid fear of the grand jury," McLean says. "Many people are afraid of it — but it is here to help good government."

"For instance, if a department head wants to put something into effect that would be for the good of the county, he might go to the grand jury for backing and accomplish a goal that he couldn't reach on his own."

Conferences with county department heads, showing them new ideas in ways to function; helping the data processing department work more effectively; hearing complaints by citizens — these were some of the grand jury's accomplishments during the year.

But many accomplishments won't show up for a while.

"When we made recommendation not

to renew the contract for the animal shelter we knew it would take time to research — knew it wouldn't be done this year," McLean says, "but the people should be satisfied with progress in the right direction."

She says some go on the grand jury thinking their recommendations will be soon followed and are frustrated because they are not.

"Usually, if they are good recommen-

dations, they are carried out," she says.

"If you go back a year from now or five years from now, you will find that most of our recommendations have been carried out — but they'll make a point of not doing it too soon!"

From the point of view of the juror, McLean points out, "If nothing else, it educates 19 people every year about what needs to be done in good government."



Hulda McLean