

## Local news

# Grand jurors want pay increase

By MAY WONG

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SANTA CRUZ — The county's civil grand jurors want more money to do their jobs.

"The more effective a grand jury is, the more it will cost," grand jury foreman Thomas Sprague said Friday.

The 19-member panel, which acts as a watchdog of government agencies, is working on a proposal that they hope the Board of Supervisors will consider sometime next month. They plan to ask for an increase in compensation that will put them more in line with the rates paid by other counties.

In a recent letter to the board, members of the panel stated that Santa Cruz County has one of the lowest paid grand juries in the state. The county gives the civil grand jurors less in mileage and

allowances per meeting now, than it did 10 years ago.

"We believe one of the problems with the jury of the past year was the poor rate of pay," Sprague said.

The 1996-97 civil grand jury was disbanded in March after members resigned one after another amid disagreements over internal procedures. It was the first grand jury breakup ever locally and possibly statewide.

Because grand jury proceedings are secret, the exact reasons why the panel broke up remain unclear. But Sprague said the current panel thinks the budget cuts dating back to 1993 were a factor.

Serving on the civil grand jury is an intensive and largely voluntary job that entails at least 15 hours a week of work. Unlike its criminal counterpart, which serves on-call

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for two months to bring indictments, the civil grand jury requires a yearlong commitment.

Members attend dozens of meetings and investigate publicly funded agencies as well as citizen complaints. They issue a final report every June.

"Someone commits a year of their life to do this, and why should they spend another \$2,000 of their own to do it?" Sprague said. "The more it costs the juror,

the less effective will be your jury."

For years, grand jurors received \$10 for each full-quorum meeting and committee meeting, with a maximum of \$10 per day. They were paid 24 cents per mile for in-going trips only.

Then in 1993, when all county departments were forced to slash their expenditures, the Board of Supervisors cut the rate of pay that civil grand jurors receive. The

board reduced it to the statutory minimum — \$10 per full-grand jury meeting per day and 15 cents per mile for in-going trips only.

As a result, grand jurors no longer receive any compensation for committee meetings and investigations, which members say make up a significant portion of their work.

Meanwhile, other counties are paying mileage for driving both ways, according to a survey Santa Cruz County grand jurors conducted at a statewide grand jury seminar in August.

Of 10 counties surveyed, Santa Cruz ranked "at the bottom of the heap" in terms of mileage. Eight (Glenn, Yuba, San Francisco, Sacramento, Sutter, Trinity, Siskiyou and Placer) receive 31.5 cents per mile both ways. Lassen County allows 26 cents per mile both ways. And though Imperial County has

the the lowest rate — 15 cents per mile — the county pays for round trips.

At a minimum, Sprague said, grand jurors want the Board of Supervisors to adopt a pay schedule that puts them back at the county's pre-1993 levels.

Even if the proposed budget increase will not apply for the current year, panel members want to see the rate increased for future grand juries, Sprague said.

Superior Court Judge Bob Yonts, who presides over the grand jury, supports the proposal.

"It seemed to me they were being required to donate their own funds to get around and travel for the grand jury purposes," Yonts said. "They ought to be paid the customary and usual expenditures. It's only common sense."