

RTC, County & PVUSD Responses to the Santa Cruz County 2010-2011 Grand Jury Report

A Tale of Two Approaches to Responses

Those who govern, having much business on their hands, do not generally like to take the trouble of considering and carrying into execution new projects. The best public measures are therefore seldom adopted from previous wisdom, but forced by the occasion.

- Benjamin Franklin

The 2011-2012 Grand Jury published the responses^[1] to the 2010-2011 Final Report this fall that exposed a contrast in the quality of public servant responses. One of the most striking contrasts can be seen in the rote responses to the Transportation Report versus the constructive responses by the Pajaro Valley Unified School District.

Transportation Report

Last year's Grand Jury report^[2] highlighted what it saw as a lack of collaboration and execution for regional transportation planning between the County of Santa Cruz, the Regional Transportation Commission (RTC) and the cities. The Grand Jury expected each respondent to evaluate its findings and recommendations more thoroughly. However, many of the responses failed to substantively address the material in the report. Furthermore, the inconsistencies among responses confirm the Grand Jury's original finding of planning gridlock and dysfunction. An example of this type of inconsistency can be found in the response given by the RTC to Finding F3, where they disagree with a finding that is paraphrased from their own 2010 Regional Transportation Plan.

The County responses were notably lengthy and bureaucratic, often failing to directly answer the question. For example, the County's 1100+ word response to Recommendation R1 outlined procedural processes without explaining why the recommendation could not be implemented. Most respondents supplied nearly identical boilerplate answers, suggesting a lack of desire to participate thoughtfully. It appears that few respondents were willing to consider additional constructive actions necessary to improve the coordination of long-range transportation planning.

The Grand Jury believes that state law and local codes, as cited by the respondents, represent the *minimum* threshold of performance under which local governments must operate. The Grand Jury did not question the agencies' compliance with the law. The County was asked to more actively collaborate with the RTC in updating its transportation plan. They did not appear to consider changing their procedures, protocols and ordinances to improve their processes.

The citizens of Santa Cruz County should not accept the quotation of various laws as an excuse for not seeking better ways to address thorny problems. Regulations need not bar local government from creative solutions to the county's most intractable transportation issues. The Transportation Report respondents may want to take a cue from the Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) in making constructive changes.

Pajaro Valley Union School District Report

In stark contrast to the transportation respondents, PVUSD appeared to give serious and thoughtful consideration to their responses. Although they didn't entirely agree with the Grand Jury's analysis of their vendor selection process, they did agree that change was warranted. The District also made constructive statements to the press.^[3] They rapidly implemented process improvements with the selection of a new consultant.^[4]

This is how the process of the Grand Jury should work: government and policy makers can improve their performance and efficiency by constructively responding to the findings and recommendations issued by the Grand Jury.

Conclusion

The overarching goal of Grand Jury investigations is to shine a light upon areas where government can improve. The citizens ultimately are in charge, and their role is to provide the mandate for change when poor practices and inefficiencies are exposed. In the absence of direction from citizens, government does not change. We hope this commentary will inspire citizens to insist on improved performance from their local officials.

Sources

1. "Responses to Santa Cruz County Grand Jury Final Report for 2010-2011." Accessed June 10, 2012. <http://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=nHDrhLI3fl4%3d&tabid=895>
2. "Santa Cruz County Grand Jury Final Report for 2010-2011." Accessed June 8, 2012. http://www.co.santa-cruz.ca.us/grandjury/GJ2011_final/index.html
3. Jones, Donna. 2011. "Grand Jury prompts change in Pajaro Valley bidding process." *Santa Cruz Sentinel*, June 30, 2011. Accessed June 13, 2012. http://www.santacruzsentinel.com/stateofourschools/ci_18382691
4. Pajaro Valley Unified School District. 2011. Board meeting minutes. October 26. Accessed June 13, 2012. <http://pps-pajaro-ca.schoolloop.com/file/1303568801232/1303568743253/8043284533747165554.pdf>