

OPEN MEETINGS, CLOSED SESSIONS

Summary

Members of the 2002-2003 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury attended meetings of the Board of Supervisors. The Jury found that the meetings were conducted in a courteous and professional manner, but that the timing and format of the meetings discourages public attendance and participation.

Reason for Investigation

The investigation was undertaken at the Grand Jury's initiative in support of our charter to "investigate and report on the operations, accounts and/or functions of the county".

Background

This Grand Jury decided to re-institute the policy of some past Grand Juries of having at least one member attend each meeting of the Board of Supervisors to become familiar with issues being acted upon by the Board, and in order to observe its decision making processes

Investigative Procedures

Jurors attended thirteen meetings of the Board of Supervisors.

Findings

F1. The Board of Supervisors regularly meets at 8:30 A.M. on Tuesdays. The agenda is available in advance (typically by the Thursday preceding the meeting) on the Internet at the County's web site, www.sonoma-county.org, and in the Board's office.

F2. The Board usually meets for an unspecified period of time, occasionally only for a few minutes, before going into closed session. The public meeting then resumes, usually at 2:00 P.M.

F3. Based on the agenda, it is frequently not possible to determine when a particular item will be discussed.

F4. Many similar local government bodies, such as the Santa Rosa City Council, have their regular meetings in the late afternoon or evening making it convenient for the public to attend.

F5. The Board was observed to be courteous and receptive to members of the public wishing to speak.

Conclusions

The Board meetings are well-managed by the President. The only concern of this Jury, and it is a major concern, is that the time and format of the meetings is not at all conducive to public attendance or participation. Citizens are unable to determine when during the day a particular issue will be before the Board, so interested persons must take the entire day off from work, making participation in the process extremely difficult. For example, since the Board and the Grand Jury meet at the same time during the day, it was necessary for that juror to miss at least part of the Jury meeting; therefore, it was generally not feasible for more than one juror to attend the Board meeting.

The Jury recognizes that scheduling the meetings during the day and not adhering to a strictly defined schedule is convenient to the Board, but believes that this does not justify a format that discourages citizen participation. This creates the impression that the Board is not interested in citizen input. The Jury urges the Board to give serious consideration to changes which encourage public participation, such as scheduling late afternoon or evening sessions. The Board should also make it possible for citizens to know when a particular issue will be discussed. The agenda items should be reserved for the beginning or end of the meeting.

Recommendations

R1. The Board of Supervisors should change the format and timing of its meetings to encourage public attendance and participation.

R2. Include time for public comment in the agenda the week before an item is voted on.

Required Responses to Findings

None

Required Responses to Recommendations

Board of Supervisors: R1, R2