

Your County Wants You

Summary

Sonoma County is known for its high level of civic volunteerism and community involvement. The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) investigated an important example of this: the County's Boards, Commissions, Committees & Task Forces (BCCTFs) that are largely made up of citizen volunteers generally appointed by the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (Board). As a group, these bodies represent grassroots



engagement in civic work by and on behalf of the public. The Grand Jury investigated how the County attracts citizens to participate, how individual qualifications are matched with County needs, and how individual BCCTF contributions are evaluated. Part of the Grand Jury's purpose in issuing this report is to encourage citizen participation in civic life by assisting the County in its outreach efforts to fill these appointments.

There are 75 County BCCTFs. The diversity of these bodies reflects the wide range of activities for which the Board is responsible. The BCCTFs respond to different federal and state mandates, Board ordinances, and public pressure. The variety of BCCTFs makes it difficult for the County to apply standard procedural and evaluative policies. One size does not fit all. This accounts for the somewhat ad hoc nature of recruitment and ongoing evaluation. The roles of some individual BCCTFs may overlap, but all provide valuable services and opportunities for citizen involvement.

The Grand Jury's recommendations are largely directed toward finding more ways to improve County outreach to involve a broader and more diverse population, and to establish a larger pool of citizens with skills, experiences, and interests for these important and valuable civic functions.

For information about BCCTF opportunities, please visit the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors website at <http://www.supervisors.sonoma-county.org> and select Boards, Commissions, Committees and Task Forces. Other County government volunteer opportunities also exist—primarily within County departments—and are accessed through the Human Services Department. For more information see the Board of Supervisors website (above), select the menu titled Resident, and scroll to Volunteering in Sonoma County.

Background

Initially considering the broader question of the public input process in government affairs, the Grand Jury narrowed its focus to investigate County policies and procedures regarding BCCFTs, including how qualified candidates are recruited to serve, how the work of BCCTFs is evaluated and recognized, and what kind of public outreach is done for them.

Approach

The Grand Jury reviewed the County's website, which outlines the purpose, role, and composition of each of the 75 County BCCTFs. The Grand Jury interviewed members and staff of the Board and staff of the County Administrator's Office.

Discussion

Examples of the 75 Sonoma County BCCFTs include the Advisory Council to Area Agency on Aging, Agricultural Preservation, Civil Service Commission, Planning Commission, and Camp Meeker Sewer

Advisory Committee. Some are decision-making groups, most are advisory, and a few make policy. BCCTFs are composed of local citizens as well as elected officials and staff from the County, cities, special districts, and agencies. Membership varies from as few as three to as many as 56. Most BCCTFs provide no financial remuneration, although some offer a small stipend.

BCCTFs come into existence in various ways. Some are the direct result of federal and state mandates; others originate from Board ordinances, which often respond to public concerns over specific issues. Due to the diversity of these BCCTFs, creating standard policies is difficult and can become counterproductive. With respect to citizen participation on BCCTFs, the Grand Jury investigated the following questions:

- What is the outreach and recruitment program?
- How is the assessment of candidates' qualifications conducted?
- What are the criteria for appointment?
- How are vacancies filled?

No specific recruitment program applies to all. Some BCCTFs self-recruit. The Board recommends and appoints BCCTF members, sometimes jointly with other government agencies. Supervisors and staff review candidate qualifications and conduct interviews. Assessment of qualifications is done at the time of application. The County provides a web page for each BCCTF that gives term lengths of appointments and lists of members and vacant positions. The Grand Jury found that with some exceptions, these individual BCCTF web pages do not explain qualifications necessary for appointment.

Although accountable to the Board, each BCCTF is largely self-governing and functions with a large amount of independence from County governance. The Grand Jury investigated whether and to what extent the County or the Board evaluates and recognizes the work of individual BCCTFs. Ongoing evaluation is spotty and inconsistent, varying considerably from one BCCTF to another. This, combined with the lack of publicly available information about past activities and accomplishments of individual BCCTFs or their members, makes it challenging for citizens to understand what they do and to assess their performance. For some of the BCCTFs it is also difficult to find details about past agendas and meetings. This information could be useful for public outreach. The Grand Jury also found formal recognition of BCCTF efforts to be largely nonexistent.

The Grand Jury wishes to acknowledge the 850 volunteers as well as the County officials and staff who participate on BCCTFs. It strongly urges citizens to volunteer in this civic work that is a vital part of County government and administration. For information about BCCTF volunteer opportunities, visit the Board website at <http://www.supervisors.sonoma-county.org>. Select Boards, Commissions, Committees and Task Forces. Information about volunteer positions in County agencies can be found by selecting Residents at the Board website and going to Volunteering in Sonoma County. The Grand Jury also recognizes citizens who volunteer in other human service activities in the County. For information on these opportunities, visit the Volunteer Center of Sonoma County at <http://www.volunteernow.org> or call 707-573-3399.

Findings

- F1. Sonoma County's online information on each board, commission, committee, and task force does not fully explain the qualifications necessary for appointment.
- F2. The decentralized nature of individual boards, commissions, committees, and task forces precludes a uniform evaluation of their work.
- F3. The County provides limited recognition of the work done by the boards, commissions, committees, and task forces, and their members.

- F4. Sonoma County’s outreach efforts to encourage participation on the boards, commissions, committees, and task forces are insufficient.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. On each website of the individual boards, commissions, committees, and task forces, the County Administrator’s Office include information specifying the qualifications necessary for appointment.
- R2. The Board of Supervisors direct that each board, commission, committee and task force post, on its website, an annual one-page report about its activities and accomplishments that will provide accountability and transparency.
- R3. The Board of Supervisors adopt a program to recognize the boards, commissions, committees, and task forces and their members, to solicit greater public interest and participation.
- R4. The County Administrator’s Office provide increased visibility of and public access to board, commission, committee, and task force meetings and activities.

Required Responses

Pursuant to Penal Code Section 933.05, the Grand Jury requires responses from the following:

- R1, R4 – Sonoma County Administrator’s Office
- R2, R3 – Sonoma County Board of Supervisors

The governing body indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda, and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the names of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.