

# Grand jury: El Dorado County is dysfunctional

By Kathryn Reed

A year after the El Dorado County Grand Jury was disbanded mid-session, the next group investigated 20 issues.

The county is dysfunctional in many aspects was the conclusion. The final report was released Thursday.

The report says, "Early in its term, the grand jury began to see a thread of dysfunction running through El Dorado County government. The grand jury heard repeated testimony of three practices, which would seriously jeopardize efficiency in any organization and are especially troublesome in an organization with the complexity, varied duties and size of El Dorado County government:

1. Elected officials can refuse to cooperate with both the Board of Supervisors and the county's chief administrative officer.
2. Department heads both elected and appointed went around the CAO directly to the Board of Supervisors in support of their own positions to the detriment of the county as a whole.
3. Individual members of the Board of Supervisors interfered in the day to day administration of the county."

All of this, according to the report, came at the expense of taxpayer dollars, wasted time and work not getting done.

The jury found that the county's Charter is in part to blame because it allows elected officials beyond the Board of Supervisors to have power that an ordinary employee would not likely have. The recommendation is to only have the elected positions that are required by the state Constitution –

district attorney, sheriff, assessor and Board of Supervisors.

“We are going to seriously consider the contents of the grand jury report regarding the dysfunction of the county and we do plan to respond,” Stephanie McCorkle told *Lake Tahoe News*. McCorkle’s firm has been hired by the county to do public relations work.

She added that much of what the grand jury found the county had earlier uncovered in a survey it did.

The county has to review the Charter every five years and started to do so last week by a committee. Those meetings are open to the public. The supervisors would have to approve changes to the Charter and then the voters would make the final decision.

**Other key grand jury investigations:**

- Sixteen employees of the South Lake Tahoe Probation Office were questioned. “The employees interviewed are intelligent, well spoken, and dedicated. They have college degrees and many years of probation experience. Yet, most described the work place environment as **toxic**. Supervisors and managers micromanage employees; fostering and allowing a *clique* system that identifies employees as either favored, or shunned, by management.” (The emphasis was written by the grand jury.)

The recommendation is the new chief needs to make eliminating the cliques a priority.

“The cumulative result, described by employees and some managers, is poor morale in and dysfunction of the SLT Probation office as a whole, detracting from their overall mission to enforce court orders.”

The recommendation is for the skills of managers and supervisors to be reviewed, as well as looking at the worker to manager ratio.

“El Dorado County hired a new chief probation officer on Dec. 2, 2013. A week after beginning his duties, the grand jury disclosed its findings about the working environment in the South Lake Tahoe office to him. Four months later the new chief reported back that he had not found the toxic work environment and had made no substantive change to personnel or policies. The grand jury then re-interviewed SLT personnel who reported that, in fact, the same toxic environment continues.”

- The grand jury found that when the county waived the permit fees for property owners in the Angora Fire burn area, this was a gift of public funds. The same goes for other times the Board of Supervisors waived fees.

“The grand jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors no longer waive or reimburse permit fees unless they are specifically allowed by a board policy, California Constitution or state statute. Waving fees in an ad hoc manner gives the impression of collusion and favoritism.”

- The animal shelter in Placerville came under scrutiny for how the county deals with real estate acquisitions and leasing protocols. Environmental report, architectural studies and leasing temporary property cost the county hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“The Grand Jury recommends the Facilities Investment Team concept be kept active, but reviewed by the CAO on a regular basis for its effectiveness. Although we found no evidence of improprieties, the same individual was used in each of the four projects where a real estate broker was utilized.”

- It was determined that toxic limestone waste continues to flow into Webber Creek from the former Diamond Lime Plant site, and that no one is doing anything about it. “It would be completely irresponsible of the county to allow the Diamond Dorado Parkway project to proceed without ensuring that all environmental issues and mitigations have been resolved.”

- The grand jury received multiple complaints about improper grading on private property that affected other properties. Investigation led the jury to conclude that there “was a pattern and practice of failing to comply with the county Grading Ordinance.”

The ultimate finding was, “The county’s failure to enforce its Grading, Erosion and Sediment Control Ordinance encourages illegal grading to the detriment of other property owners and residents.”

Some things the grand jury looks into are mandated by the state – like checking on the management and conditions of the county jails each year, as well as the juvenile detention facilities.

The South Lake Tahoe and Placerville jails have a difficult time hiring women, have been impacted by the state sending prisoners to the county jails, and mental illness is a growing problem among inmates.

The jury recommends because of the age of both facilities replacement of them should be considered, and that management should look into why there is high staff turnover.

Concerned citizens initiate other investigations. In the case of the probation department, it was an article in *Lake Tahoe News* that prompted the probe.

In the final report released June 19, grand jury foreman Neil Cunningham said if the county adheres to the recommendations, “El Dorado County will follow the lead of many other California counties and step in to the 21st century.”

Public agencies have 90 days to file a written response to the grand jury’s findings, while elected officials or department heads have 60 days.