

COUNTY POLARIZATION

INTRODUCTION

To split or not to split, that is the question. There has been and will always be some level of disagreement within those governed. The issue now seems to focus on the ultimate remedy – split the County. For the second time in 25 years, this issue is being brought before the County electorate. The answers are not easy and the debate can cause strong emotions. The Grand Jury interviewed many respected people on both sides as well as those undecided. The one item of consensus is that the County does suffer from a high degree of polarization.

The Cause

This sharp division of opposing factions is fostered by issues which include land use, property rights, responsiveness of government and fundamental differences in philosophy and culture.

THE PROCESS

The first step in the formal process (California Government Code Section 23300) to consider a split has started. The proponents of the split have notified the County Registrar's office of their intent to initiate the petition process. Upon securing signatures of at least 25% of the registered voters of the proposed County, the petition is submitted to the Santa Barbara County Clerk for certification.

Upon certification, the Governor has 120 days to appoint a five person County Formation Review Commission. The Commission shall determine many items related to the new County including the fiscal impact on each portion of the County, as well as the economic viability of the proposed County. The Commission will also determine many issues related to the formation of the new County; i.e. supervisorial districts, location of the County seat, transition of services and responsibilities, boundaries and county offices to be filled by election.

The Commission has 180 days (may request an additional 180 days) to report in writing to the Board of Supervisors (BOS). Within 74 days, the BOS shall give notice of an election. If the voters decide in favor of a County split, an election will be held with the next statewide primary or general election to select the various County officers.

CONCLUSION

The Grand Jury's Quandary

The Grand Jury decided that the appropriate position is to remain neutral. As a neutral observer, what should the Grand Jury do as a service to the people of Santa Barbara County? There is no doubt that moving through the process of petitions, the Governor's Commission and voting will not solve the basic problems which have fostered polarization. If anything, this process will create further polarization among the citizens of Santa Barbara County.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATION

Finding 1: Polarization is a real issue to many County residents.

Finding 2: The process of collecting signatures on a petition to divide the County has been initiated. This process may end with an election in 2003 or 2004 on whether to split Santa Barbara County.

Finding 3: The debate on the County split issue, as it goes forward, will tend to cause greater divisiveness which can harm the community regardless of the outcome.

Recommendation 1: The Grand Jury recommends the Board of Supervisors (BOS) fund an independent, non-partisan, Citizens' Commission on Polarization to identify the issues that have caused the polarization of Santa Barbara County and to develop ways to address those issues. The BOS should seek two or three individuals of stature who are held in high esteem by a broad cross-section of the County population. Possible candidates might be drawn from the education, business and judicial communities; retired political leaders, former Grand Jurors and appropriate non-residents of the County. Those selected must receive unanimous or near unanimous (four of five) approval of the BOS. These Commission leaders would then identify and select 12 to 15 additional Commissioners. The Commission would review and identify the polarizing factors and recommend to the BOS and County residents possible solutions.

The Commission should also explore the non-financial aspects of a split County, such as water resources, identity values, regional transportation, Coastal Commission relations and other issues it may deem significant.

AFFECTED AGENCY

Board of Supervisors

Findings 1, 2, 3

Recommendation 1