

County of Lassen
ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES



CHRIS GALLAGHER
District 1
GARY BRIDGES
District 2
TOM NEELY
District 3
AARON ALBAUGH
District 4
JASON INGRAM
District 5

RICHARD EGAN
County Administrative Officer
email: coadmin@co.lassen.ca.us

County Administration Office
221 S. Roop Street, Suite 4
Susanville, CA 96130
Phone: 530-251-8333
Fax: 530-251-2663

November 12, 2024

The Honorable Mark Nareau
Presiding Judge, Lassen Superior Court
2610 Riverside Dr.
Susanville, CA 96130

Dear Judge Nareau,

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933(c), please accept the Lassen County Board of Supervisors and County Administrative Officer response to the 2023-2024 Lassen County Grand Jury report. Our response is attached.

While we may or may not be able to implement every recommendation as a result of other limitations, the Board of Supervisors welcomes the constructive criticism offered by the Grand Jury, considers it seriously, and takes to heart the recommendations brought forth. The Board of Supervisors joins the Grand Jury in trying to make local government as efficient and effective as possible.

We would like to take this opportunity to recognize the Court and the 2023-2024 Lassen County Grand Jury for a job well done.

Respectfully,

Aaron Albaugh, Chairman
Lassen County Board of Supervisors

Richard Egan, CAO
Lassen County

Introduction

The California Grand Jurors Association states that the mission of a civil Grand Jury is to “help local government be more accountable and efficient.” They also state that their mission is to “facilitate positive change....”. The Lassen County Board of Supervisors applauds this goal and would like to thank the citizens who have given of themselves to serve as Lassen County Grand Jurors. The Lassen County Board of Supervisors recognizes the considerable contribution of time and energy by private citizens for the benefit of Lassen County as a whole.

The Board of Supervisors welcomes the constructive criticism offered by the Grand Jury, considers it seriously, and takes to heart the recommendations brought forth by the Grand Jury. The Board of Supervisors joins the Grand Jury in trying to make local government as efficient and effective as possible. Over the next pages the Lassen County Board of Supervisors and the County Administrative Officer will be presenting its response to this year’s Grand Jury report.

Grand Jury Report: City of Susanville and Lassen County Homelessness

Recommendation Number 1: “Lassen County Board of Supervisors should form a committee and hold quarterly collaborative meetings (if not already occurring), to include Lassen County Housing, Lassen County Health & Human Services representatives, Fish & Game, California Highway Patrol (CHP), Lassen County Sheriff, Susanville Police Department, Susanville Parks & Recreation, County and City Supervisor representatives and concerned/affected citizens, with reports to appropriate local media.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation will not be implemented. All County departments related to housing issues work collaboratively among themselves and with their community partners. The local media attends the Board of Supervisors meetings when there are reports from those County departments update the Board and obtain authority and direction with regard to housing issues.

Recommendation Number 3: “The County should hire or create a media liaison or Public Information Officer (PIO) to communicate between government agencies and the general public.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation has been implemented. The County Administrative Officer also acts as the County Public Information Officer, and has for decades. It is recognized that timely, accurate, media sources are absent in the County, and that the County should consider, in the context of other priorities, allocating additional resources to this function in future budget years.

Recommendation Number 4: “The City and the County should continue to establish ordinances to enforce camping regulations on public property.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation has been implemented. As the grand jury notes, this is ongoing, thus requires no further explanation.

Recommendation Number 5: “The City and the County should establish a joint committee with Caltrans, California Fish and Game and other regulatory agencies to monitor the Susan River for camping and protection of the environment of the river and any contaminations.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation will not be implemented. The County, City, Caltrans, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife (We believe this is the entity the Grand Jury intended to refer to) each have distinct jurisdiction, and roles regarding land along the Susan River. The County continues to monitor, and enforce existing Code enforcement and Camping regulations.

Recommendation Number 6: “The City and the County should continue enforcement of ordinances already established.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation has been implemented by the County. As the grand jury notes, this is ongoing, thus requires no further explanation.

Grand Jury Report:

Office of Lassen County Auditor-Controller

Finding Number 8: “Lack of local press coverage (i.e., printed newspaper) or news outlet (broadcast news), limits communication to the public regarding current status of county business.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the notion that the absence of local media “limits communication...”. The reality is that a formerly robust local media no longer exists in print or broadcast. This situation is definitely unfortunate, but not a deliberate limitation, but rather a function of the market and media economics. Whether there is media in the County is not an issue within the jurisdiction of the County to resolve.

Finding Number 9: “County government has failed to attract sufficient qualified persons and prospective officeholders to both fill the available positions and present a choice for the voters. This is not restricted to the Office of the Auditor-Controller”

Response/Comment:

The County agrees with the Grand Jury’s finding but questions the implication that it is the County Governments role to recruit its elected representatives. In fact, the County should not be involved in advocating for any candidates for elected positions.

Finding Number 10: “The process of appointment by the Board of Supervisors for the Auditor-Controller vacant seat was unsatisfactory given that the Office of the Auditor-Controller is a technically challenging

and professionally demanding position. The Civil Grand Jury has found that the appointment process in 2020 resulted in the appointment of a candidate incapable of handling a looming software transition of a vital personnel and payroll system.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the finding. The candidate appointed by the Board of Supervisors in 2020, was objectively the most educated and experienced individual to hold the office.

Finding Number 11: “In 2022, there were nine months left before the installment of new county officers, yet the Board of Supervisors was slow and ineffective in its effort to recruit a new Auditor-Controller, leading to a hasty decision for appointment.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the finding. The Board of Supervisors did not have the legal authority to make an appointment until the office was vacated. The Board promptly conducted a traditional recruitment and appointment process that was unsuccessful. A hasty decision was not made, and the finding is internally inconsistent as it claims both that the decision was slow and “hasty.”

Finding Number 12: “County employees charged with keeping track of both county funds and State and Federal dollars are sorely in need of training and professional development.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the finding. The County recognizes that training and development of employees is an ongoing challenge and is continuously engaging in that effort. To generalize that all County employees engaged in “keeping track of both county funds and State and Federal dollars are sorely in need of training...” is over simplification of a very complex issue, and quite frankly false. We believe the generalization indicates the Grand Jury’s ignorance of the very complex fiscal structure.

Finding Number 13: “The Civil Grand Jury recognizes that the deficiencies noted in the external single audits for the past eight years, generally involve accounting methods required for Federal grants (accrual basis) being different from the perfectly adequate methods used for decades (cash basis) in the accounting of funds generally, and failures in various county departments to recognize this difference.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the finding. The finding is an unintelligible, run-on, incomplete sentence. As such, it is impossible to agree or formulate an appropriate response.

Finding Number 14: “While problems with the transition from outdated accounting software to the new Munis software has been bumpy and wasteful, the effort has been stabilized and is on-track to full implementation by July 2024.”

Response/Comment:

The County agrees with the finding.

Finding Number 15: “The Civil Grand Jury found no written succession plan in the Office of the Auditor-Controller. When the incumbent Wemple left office in 2020 for retirement, there was no one to fill the void. Appointed Auditor-Controller Morgan left in early 2023 for health reasons. Therefore, the statutory remedy of appointing a qualified officeholder was only partly successful, resulting ultimately in a vacant ballot in 2022, followed by a vacant office in 2023.”

Response/Comment:

The County agrees with the finding. It should be noted however, that elected officials such as the Auditor/Controller are charged with management of their respective departments.

Finding Number 16: “The results of the advisory votes on County Measure T & U by a margin of three to one, show that the voters want to elect their Auditor, and do not deem to trust that selection to the Lassen County Board of Supervisors. Moreover, the voters desire that the offices of Auditor-Controller and Treasurer-Tax Collector remain vital, separate, and independent parts of county government.”

Response/Comment:

The County agrees with the finding.

Finding Number 17: “Public office is a public trust. When Auditor-Controller Wemple was re-elected to office in 2018, she had entered a four-year compact with the voters. Wemple let the People of Lassen County down by her early vacating of the trust the voters placed in her to fulfill that oath.”

Response/Comment:

The County disagrees with the finding. Quite simply the statement is false on its surface. “Public trust” is a term meaning reliability, ability, and truth. A Public Office is a position of authority involving responsibility to the public. The two are important, but different things. We do not understand the equivocation, but to the extent that the Grand jury meant to indicate that public officials should be persons whom gain and maintain the public’s trust we agree. The County will not comment on whether the prior Auditor-Controller “let the voters down,” as this finding constitutes a frivolous and baseless attack not within the jurisdiction of the Grand Jury.

Finding Number 18: “The Civil Grand Jury found it hard to find some information on county websites, especially organizational charts to lead us to certain points of contact for further information.”

Response/Comment:

The County agrees with the finding. We do not know what efforts the Grand Jury went to “find information” and believe that most information is readily available, but accept that the Grand jury found it “hard to find.”

Recommendation Number 8: “The Chief Administrative Officer should work with the Lassen County Board of Supervisors to budget for, seek, and hire a Public Information Officer (PIO) to report on a

regular basis to the public, so the public is more informed and can elect their representatives with necessary knowledge in hand.

Response/Comment:

This recommendation will not be implemented. The County maintains several officers that act as Public information Officers during times of need (i.e. District Attorney, Sherriff, CAO, Public Health Director.) The County continually finds itself having to prioritize its activities with scarce resources. In a world of unlimited resources, the County Administrative Officer would undoubtedly agree, but in the context of public safety, public health, and other priorities we believe that the current structure provides accurate, appropriate, timely public information.

Recommendation Number 9: "The Board of Supervisors should develop a comprehensive written plan to find and entice qualified persons to run for office."

Response/Comment:

This recommendation will not be implemented. The Board of Supervisors respects the will of the voters. The voters have recently overwhelmingly confirmed that they support the traditional method of filling these offices and believes that interfering with the electoral process would be detrimental and improper.

Recommendation Number 11: "The Board of Supervisors should engage in contingency planning for this scenario (finding F11), as there is a distinct possibility that this situation will repeat in the near future. The Chief Administrative Officer should work to coordinate Board development of a written planning document."

Response/Comment:

This recommendation will not be implemented. The County routinely is charged with filling vacant elected office due to untimely vacancy. The existing recruitment and screening process are felt to be adequate.

Recommendation Number 12: "The Chief Administrative Officer should mandate annual continuing education and training for all county staff that work with or handle funds and/or accounts, to include management of State and Federal grants. Enforce attendance and test for comprehension. Initiate HR actions as required. The Chief Administrative Officer should routinely assure the Board of Supervisors that this is carried out."

Response/Comment:

Note; We believe that the Grand Jury intended to refer to County Administrative Officer in this response and are answering accordingly.

The recommendation will not be implemented. The two main departments of the County primarily responsible for handling "funds and/or accounts..." are managed by elected County official outside the supervision of the County Administrative Officer. Certainly, the Administrator has and should continue to encourage training, but it is important to recognize the roles and responsibilities of elected officials.

The notion of blindly “assuring the Board of Supervisors that this is carried out ...” would be inappropriate unless it is confirmed to be true.

Recommendation Number 13: “The Board of Supervisors should provide the Auditor-Controller’s Office with resources to hire and train a compliance auditor, trained to find compliance issues before they show up in the Annual Single Audit.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation will not be implemented. The County Auditor, an independent elected official, should be allowed to organize, and manage his/her department. The Board dictating the method by which an elected official allocates resources is contrary to the elected official model and is not appropriate. If the elected official requests such resources, the Board should review and provide such resources as available.

Recommendation Number 14: “The Civil Grand Jury would like to recommend that an award be given to Ms. Cardenas for her unrelenting service to the County of Lassen to get the Auditor-Controller’s Office back on track and have a clean slate for the 2027 elected official that takes her place! If this transition is successful, this would call for an award of all IT employees involved in this effort as well!”

Response/Comment:

No respondent was identified.

Recommendation Number 15: “The Board of Supervisors should direct the Chief Administrative Officer to request each elected county official to come up with a written succession plan as well as written professional development plans. These may be published in employee policies. The Board of Supervisors should consider the question of requiring the Chief Administrative Officer to do a similar process for all non-elected county departments.”

Response/Comment:

Note; We believe that the Grand Jury intended to refer to County Administrative Officer in this response, and are answering accordingly.

The recommendation will not be implemented. As previously noted, the Board of Supervisors respects the various roles and demands of their fellow elected officials, and as such will not make this request.

Recommendation Number 16: “Based on the results of Measures T and U in the 2024 election, the Board of Supervisors should respect the decision and will of the voters. The Board of Supervisors should request the County Clerk to hold separate elective races for the Offices of Auditor-Controller and Treasurer-Tax Collector for the June 2026 election. The office staffs should be prepared to separate as directed by the current incumbent Cardenas. The incumbent Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector will leave office in January 2027, which means two separate county elected offices will be up for election.”

Response/Comment:

The recommendation has been implemented.

Recommendation Number 18: “The Chief Administrative Officer should ensure that detailed organizational charts (with names and titles of each position) for the full County Government, as well as each Department/Office, are developed and published on the County website; as well as ensure they are updated and re-published whenever there are changes.”

Response/Comment:

Note; We believe that the Grand Jury intended to refer to County Administrative Officer in this response, and are answering accordingly. The recommendation has not been implemented, but will be in the future. As resources and technology allow, it is the intent to make available detailed organizational charts on the County website.

Conclusion

The Board of Supervisors would like to once again take this opportunity to thank those who have served as Grand Jurors for the 2023-2024 year. It is a considerable commitment, and can, from what we have seen, be frustrating at times. This Board of Supervisors wishes to acknowledge our shared interest in making Lassen County a safer, happier and more productive place to live and work. We pledge to continue to work with future Grand Juries in reaching this goal.