

Print Page

Real News • Really Local

NORTH COUNTY TIMES

Real News • Really Local

THE CALIFORNIAN

Last modified Tuesday, June 2, 2009 9:03 PM PDT

OCEANSIDE: Civil grand jury raps Tri-City board

By PAUL SISSON and MELANIE MARSHALL - psisson@nctimes.com

OCEANSIDE ---- The San Diego County grand jury issued a report Tuesday finding that Tri-City Medical Center's system of governance may be holding the hospital back and urging Tri-City to seek an independent review that would include exploring other governing options.

The report concluded, in part, that Tri-City's "current model of governance by elected board members may not be a productive model for ... meeting the kinds of complex problems faced by modern health care organizations."

The report prepared by the civil grand jury was released five days after a hospital board majority --- made up of directors Kathleen Sterling, RoseMarie Reno, George Coulter and Charlene Anderson --- rejected a proposal by Tri-City doctors to form a task force to study whether the public hospital district should change its governance structure.

Hospital board members received a copy of the report days before they considered the doctors' proposal, officials said.

Tri-City board member Charlene Anderson declined to comment Tuesday on the document. Board chairwoman Madeline Rodriguez, who supported the doctors' request, said she didn't expect the report to change the minds of opposing board members.

Meanwhile, the hospital's chief of staff, Dr. Richard Burruss, said he was shocked to learn the board knew of the findings before nixing the task-force idea.

"I cannot believe that they would be so arrogant as to disregard a grand jury like that," he said.

The report recommends that the hospital board form a panel of qualified "stakeholders" in the healthcare district to conduct the outside review.

The grand jury investigates citizen complaints about government agencies in San Diego County and looks into issues that jurors raise about local governing bodies. The panel prepares written reports about its investigations and recommends changes for the agencies.

State law requires the agencies involved to file responses to grand jury reports, but the grand jury has no formal power to enforce its recommendations.

The investigation into Tri-City was launched after the panel received a citizen complaint, the report stated.

Tri-City chief executive officer Larry Anderson said Tuesday that an attorney retained by the district said the grand jury has no jurisdiction over the health-care district. Anderson said he did not know whether the board would respond to the panel's demand for a response.

The report reflected what North County residents have known for years ---- that the seven board members who run the public hospital district are often at odds, and that changes in hospital policy can be made when power swings after publicly-held elections.

The latest board majority, put in place by voters on Nov. 20, has made a series of controversial decisions, including abruptly sidelining the hospital's top administrators in a Dec. 18 special meeting.

That meeting and the turmoil that followed is referenced in the grand jury report, though the panel took no position on whether the board majority violated the Brown Act, as critics have alleged.

In conducting its investigation, the grand jury interviewed several current and former board members, though three current board members declined to be interviewed, the report stated. It did not name the board members.

Grand jury foreman L.D. Martin said Tuesday that the refusal of some board members to speak to the panel underscored that hospital's governing body lacks unity.

"I think it shows the dysfunctionality of that group as a whole," Martin said.

Martin said that if Tri-City does not respond to the grand jury's report within 90 days, a judge can compel them to do so. However, the court cannot force the hospital board to do much more than simply agree or disagree with the report's findings and list supporting reasons why.

Martin said he believes the report, even though it carries no legal weight, will help push for a look at alternate ways to run the hospital district because the grand jury is made up of citizens.

"We speak on behalf of the public and the community," he said. "We believe the public will see this and push to make some changes."