

California Grand Jury News

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Thursday, January 23, 2014

Benefits for San.Joaquin board intact

Not enough votes to alter policy of mosquito district

By Zachary K. Johnson
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STOCKTON - Health benefits for the San Joaquin County Mosquito and Vector Control District have been controversial, drawing criticism from a local taxpayers group and attention from a **county civil grand jury** since the board of trustees voted to give itself the same benefits available to district employees in 2009.

At its regular meeting Tuesday, the board was poised to put the benefits to another vote, but after a long discussion, it failed to get enough votes to either affirm the controversial benefits or change them. By default, the benefits will remain unchanged at least until the board is set to take up the issue again, at its next scheduled meeting in March.

The district and trustees have justified the benefits as something to provide an incentive for people to serve on the governing board, saying trustees have responsibilities beyond the once-a-month meetings that pay a stipend of \$100 each. They also noted the district's finances are solid, in spite of increased responsibilities as the district has worked to prevent the spread of the West Nile virus from mosquitoes to people, a new threat that emerged over the past decade.

Most trustees at Tuesday's meeting defended the benefits, though not all members spoke in favor of them.

"This board has done a tremendous job over the years. We don't get inundated by mosquitoes anymore," Trustee Jay Colombini said. "We're doing what we're supposed to be doing, are doing it fiscally responsibly, and we're building up

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- ▼ 2014 (5)
 - ▼ January (5)
 - [Benefits for San.Joaquin board intact](#)
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 - [\(Riverside County\) Grand Jury Report: Better Overs...](#)
 - [\(Santa Barbara\) Grand jury criticizes city of Lomp...](#)
- ▶ 2013 (187)
- ▶ 2012 (309)
- ▶ 2011 (398)
- ▶ 2010 (269)
- ▶ 2009 (295)
- ▶ 2008 (22)

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our reserves."

But the trustees don't put in 40 hours a week of work for those benefits, which cost money to provide, Trustee Chester Miller said. "It's a very large amount of money for what I consider to be a very part-time job."

This district pays up to 100 percent for employee-only health coverage and up to 92 percent of family coverage. These are for the lowest-cost plans the district provides. Employees make up the difference if they enroll in a higher-premium plan. Dental and vision benefits are also free for employee-only coverage. The terms are the same for trustees, though not all trustees take the coverage.

The district has an annual budget of about \$7 million. It costs roughly \$600,000 to provide health care coverage, and only about 1 percent of that cost is to pay for coverage for trustees, district officials said. "Percentage-wise of the overall budget, this is peanuts," Trustee Jack Snyder said. Trustees supporting the benefit also said it could be used to attract talented members to the board and noted that the district is not alone among irrigation, fire and other districts in the county and state that provide health care coverage to trustees.

What percentage of the budget it costs and what other districts do are not the issues, said David Renison, president of the San Joaquin Taxpayer's Association, which has been critical of the benefits. "They are using community service for personal gain, and it's an outrageous betrayal of public trust."

Renison was among the members of the public listening to Tuesday's meeting, as were two members of the county's civil grand jury. The jury issued a critical report on the district last year. One recommendation was that trustees revisit the insurance policy.

The 11-member board is appointed by city and county governments. On Tuesday, the eight trustees present voted 5-2 with one abstention to keep the benefits unchanged. Colombini and Snyder were joined by Trustees Gary Lambdin, Michael Manna and Gregory O'Leary in keeping the benefits unchanged. Miller and Trustee Omar Khweiss voted against it. Board President Marc Warmerdam abstained from the vote. Trustees Jack Fiori, Francis Groen and Joy Meeker were not present.

But there was confusion over whether that was enough to pass. It was a majority vote of those present, but not of the board as a whole.

The board moved on to other items before its legal counsel came back with the answer that a six-vote majority was needed.

The board voted to bring the issue back again at its next meeting, which is in March. Officials said most the board's actions pass with unanimous voice votes, and that close, roll-call votes are rare.

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