

EDITORIAL

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A14



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letters

New blood needed

Re "County panels seen as useless" (Dec. 21):

This reader appreciated that the Daily News took the time to bring this report to the public's attention. However, I would encourage L.A. County residents to read the report carefully and then contact their supervisor and demand that change in the commission structure be made.

The report made it clear that many commissions should be either consolidated or dismantled. I was also concerned how many commissions failed to meet regularly, even when their area of oversight was in jeopardy.

A good example of this was the L.A. County-Martin Luther King Jr. General Hospital Authority that hasn't met in at least three years. If this commission didn't meet while King-Drew Medical Center was in the midst of turmoil and the threat of closure, I wonder why the consultants would even recommend its retention.

L.A. County benefits from commissions that serve the public interest, and the best way for the board to ensure that the best, brightest and most committed get an opportunity to serve is to stop the practice of continuing some commissioner positions in perpetuity and to hold an "open-casting call" inviting all eligible L.A. County residents to apply.

— GENEVIÈVE M. CLAVREUL
Pasadena

TODAY'S
FORECAST



Periods of
clouds, sun

High 61 — Low 44

Details: C12

Sunday

December 21, 2008

ONE DOLLAR

★Designated areas higher

Daily News

DailyNews.com

County panels seen as useless

AUDIT: Report urges
14 commissions be
abolished; pay raises
proposed for others.

By Troy Anderson
Staff Writer

At least 14 of Los Angeles County's 201 commissions are ineffective or dormant and should be eliminated, according to a new draft audit obtained by the Daily News.

The report by Pasadena-based Arroyo Associates Inc. found at least 10 county commissions haven't met for years and are no longer needed, yet they continue to exist on the county's books.

Another four have failed to achieve their goals or have become irrelevant. A handful of others perform overlapping functions with other commissions and should be consolidated.

The average attendance rates by members of the county's commissions is only about 69 percent, while 21 percent of them have not met in the last

201

Number of Los
Angeles County
commissions

69%

Average
attendance rate

21%

Percentage of
commissions
inactive in the
past three years

14

Commissions
recommended for
disbanding

SOURCE: Arroyo
Associates Inc.

CUTS

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three years.

"The current way in which the commissions in Los Angeles County are managed results in ineffectiveness and inefficiencies," wrote the authors of the study, which was requested by the county's chief executive office.

But in what may become its most controversial recommendation, the report also proposes a pay increase for many of the remaining commissioners.

Currently they can make anywhere from nothing to \$225 per meeting attended. The report suggests all commissioners should make a minimum of \$50 per meeting, to compensate members for the cost of attending and to attract a more diverse membership. The change would raise the county's annual compensation cost for commissioners from \$480,000 to \$1 million.

County officials, however, said they doubted they would follow that recommendation now given the dire state of the county's finances.

Some members of the commissions targeted for elimination resent the suggestion that they are irrelevant.

Theodora Parlanti, chairwoman of the county Task Force on Nutrition — recommended for disbanding — says her commission pursues important goals.

Supervisor Mike Antonovich created the task force in 1981 to study whether proper nutrition is a factor in reducing criminal behavior.

Parlanti, citing research linking

low levels of minerals in the blood to criminal tendencies, believes improving inmate nutrition will reduce negative behaviors in county jails and probation camps.

"I'm very disappointed because I think we do good work," said Parlanti, a retired businesswoman appointed to the commission by Antonovich. "We've been able to improve the junk they put in vending machines."

But the authors of the draft report wrote the task force is supposed to meet a dozen times a year, but met only 18 times from 2005 to 2007 and the average attendance was 60 percent, "which is barely satisfactory based on our threshold."

They also wrote that in its recent "Nutrition Guidelines Report" the task force issued recommendations that were too costly and of questionable value.

Patronage or oversight?

The 201 commissions that the county has created over the years face a wide range of responsibilities, some tackling important policy challenges like health care and housing — and others foundering in bureaucratic obscurity with names like the "Interdepartmental Coordination Group" or the "Engineering Geology and Soils Review and Appeals Board."

Over the years, critics have alleged supervisors appoint friends and political supporters to the commissions.

Government experts say many commissions provide valuable advice to the supervisors. But they say the supervisors seldom follow the commissions' recommendations and they

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question the cost.

"Some are extremely effective at providing citizen governance and oversight," said Erwin Chemerinsky, the dean at the University of California, Irvine, School of Law who served on a city charter commission.

"Some really accomplish very little."

"Sometimes they put people on there for their competence and expertise. Sometimes it's for political patronage reasons, rewarding those who have provided them support."

The report was prepared as part of the restructuring of the office of the county's chief executive officer. In May 2007, former Chief Administrative Officer David Janssen requested an examination of the roles of the commissions under the new structure giving the CEO's office more power and responsibility.

Auditor-Controller

Wendy Watanabe's office was expected to formally release the report late Friday to the CEO's office. The Board of Supervisors will vote on a final list of recommendations provided by the CEO's office.

In the report, which examined only 95 commissions in detail, the authors found the county has no central organization responsible for overseeing the boards. It noted many commissions duplicate each other's work, are ineffective or have been inactive for years. They also found there are inconsistencies in how commission activities are documented and the amount members are paid.

The 14 commissions recommended for elimination range from the Task Force on Children and Youth Physical

Fitness to the Interim Planning Agency for the San Fernando Valley Transportation Zone to the Local Suppression of Drug Abuse in Schools Advisory Committee.

The four recommended for elimination because of ineffectiveness were: Task Force on Nutrition, Treasury Oversight Committee, Risk Management Advisory Committee and the Board of Governors of the County Arboreta and Botanic Gardens.

Watanabe said she believes the recommendations will help the county streamline its commission structure. "If they have the same purpose, can we merge them ... to make them more effectively run?" Watanabe said.

"I think this is just the first step. Many of the commissions haven't met in years."

Prior report cites costs

The 211-page report is the second in recent years examining the county's cornucopia of citizen commissions. In 2000, the auditor issued a report on the county's 190 commissions, finding they cost taxpayers \$7 million as of 1996-97, the last year the cost was calculated. Watanabe said no updated figure was immediately available.

Thousand Oaks resident Joseph Gentile, who chairs the Employee Relations Commission, which pays up to \$225 per meeting, defended the pay, saying it's not a "normal commission." The commission enforces the county's employee relations ordinance and resolves unfair labor practice complaints made by unions against county management.

"Our commission is charged with

enforcing an ordinance which requires knowledge of labor management relations and both state and federal laws," said Gentile, a retired lawyer and professional arbitrator and mediator.

Genevieve M. Clavreul, a former member of the county's Commission on HIV and a nurse, has been highly critical of that commission. She resigned in 2002 after its members went to a \$25,000 retreat at the Portofino Hotel and Yacht Club in Redondo Beach.

"The price was outrageous," Clavreul said. "I was furious."

But the authors of the new report only noted one recent retreat. In 2006, the county Commission on Aging held one at a senior center at a park.

Joel Fox, former president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association and president of the Small Business Action Committee, said he's served on a number of state and county commissions over the years.

"I think government by commission is a path that usually doesn't solve many problems," Fox said.

"The commission becomes self-important and they are hard to do away with, they defend their turf and always claim if they weren't there, some portion of the populace would be vulnerable, but I don't buy that."

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For more information, including details on the county's commissions and a copy of the draft report, go to dailynews.com.