

Grand jury foreperson offers glimpse into how the process works

By Nick Baptista / The Valley Springs News / June 28, 2017

Grand juries often are stereotyped as only pointing out the negative, but 2016-17 Calaveras County Grand Jury Foreperson Robert Macias of Valley Springs believes it's important for grand juries to also show what's positive in local government.

The annual grand jury report for the county came out earlier this month and although some government operations were taken to task, investigations also pointed to some positives such as how the county jail is well run despite budget constraints.

"We just don't seek out the negative things," Macias said. "There are times we want to say keep these people around here, we like what they're doing."

Macias has lived in Valley Springs for the last six years. He was raised in Fresno and is a graduate of Fresno State University with a master's degree in computer science.

His path to becoming the foreperson began with the 2015-16 grand jury when he was selected as an alternate juror. Midway through the year someone had to step down from the jury and he was chosen to fill the vacancy. He finished the term as foreperson pro tem and at the beginning of the 2016-17 term was selected as the foreperson.

He was reluctant at first, but has enjoyed the experience.

The 2017-18 grand jury will be selected on Friday. The new jury will have five returnees from the 2016-17 jury and 14 new members will be chosen out of a raffle drum. There will also be 10 alternates. Superior Court Judge Grant Barrett will be the presiding judge for the new jury.

The grand jury meets as a whole at least once a month, Macias said.

At the monthly meeting the jury reviews any new complaints that have been filed, determines what to investigate and then breaks into smaller groups to work on any ongoing investigations.

Macias would also meet with the presiding judge, Superior Court Judge Tim Healy during his year as foreperson, once a month to discuss the status of the jury and seek any necessary directions.

The grand jury received nearly 30 citizen complaints during the 2016-17 term and each one went to the full grand jury for consideration, Macias said.

The jury is polled as to whether the complaint should be pursued, he added.

The corresponding secretary of the jury acknowledges to the complainant the complaint has been received. However, there are no follow-ups or updates given to the complainant.

“The rule is we don’t share any information outside,” Macias said. “Everything has to remain in house.”

Jurors receive \$15 for every day they perform grand jury duties and a mileage reimbursement.

“Serving as a grand juror shows your commitment to the cause, you’re not here to gain wealth,” he added.

Investigations of Angels Camp, the jail and assessor’s office took more than 100 hours each, Macias said.

Those entities investigated by the grand jury and asked to provide a response have 90 days to do so.

Many investigations never reached the report level, but that doesn’t mean the new jury will not pursue them, he added.

The new jury has the option of picking them up, but they cannot rely on notes from past juries.

They can use materials gathered from a prior jury such as public records, but have to conduct new interviews, he added.

Macias’s time as foreperson did not end with the final report. His term continues for another three months so he can answer any questions arising out of the past grand jury’s work.

Once that is done, he will have more time to pursue his passion of becoming a master class chess player.