

# REPORT: CALAVERAS 'CASH COW' NEEDS REINING IN

## GRAND JURY FINDS MUCH NEEDED FUNDING LOST THROUGH LACK OF CODE ENFORCEMENT EMPLOYEES

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SAN ANDREAS - If your neighbor puts up an enormous, ugly and illegal sign that spoils the view from your front window, you might have to just live with it for a while.

At least that's true if you live in Calaveras County.

A Calaveras grand jury report issued last week found that the county doesn't have enough code enforcement officers to keep up with complaints.

And the director of the county's Building Department says that as a result, code enforcers focus first on potentially dangerous violations, such as illegal construction or squatter-occupied foreclosure homes, leaving merely ugly problems such as illegal signs on a long backlog list.

"The problem is for every, say, five code cases that we close out, we probably get 25 new ones coming in," said Jeff White, the director of the Building Department. "The numbers don't work."

The grand jury report said the Building Department has a backlog of 600 complaints but only two code enforcement officers.

White said his department shrank dramatically in 2009, when two other code officers as well as building inspection staff were laid off because of budget cuts and the collapse of home construction.

Building inspectors and code officers have similar skill sets and people in the two classifications at times are assigned to work in the other job, White said.

The entire Building Department has only nine employees, including the two code inspectors and two building inspectors, according to the report.

The grand jury urged county leaders to hire more staff for the department and argued that the fines brought in by code officers more than pay the approximately \$75,000-per-officer-per-year cost to hire them.

The grand jury report described code enforcement as a "cash cow" that funds other county needs. The report said the two current officers brought in \$262,000 in fines in 2011 and \$230,000 in fines in 2012.

White said he agrees that it would be wise to expand the code enforcement staff in an effort to reduce the backlog.

He was not willing, however, to endorse all the grand jury recommendations.

Two of those recommendations call on the county Board of Supervisors to lay out a much more detailed set of rules for assessing code violation fines and to reduce the discretion code officers have to waive fines when violators promptly come into compliance.

White says it is useful for code officers to be able to tell those who have violated a code that prompt compliance can mean reduced penalties.

"They shouldn't be fined as heavily as somebody who refuses to resolve the problem," White said of those who cooperate with code officers. "It is a judgement call of the guy working the case as to what those fines should be levied at to gain compliance."

White said his office now receives five to 10 new code complaints a week, and that about 35 percent of the new complaints involved foreclosed homes.

White and Todd Barr, one of the department's code officers, said that it may take a long time to address complaints involving bank-owned or abandoned homes because banks often simply do not respond to government communication and it may not be possible to find the former residents.

White said repeated contact with the owner of a property is key to building an airtight case in the event that the county has to simply abate a problem and then put a lien on the house to recover the costs.

"The process is slow. But it is the way we have to do it," White said.

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