

# Public Comment - League of Women Voters'



CLUE (Clergy & Laity United for Economic Justice) Santa Barbara

August 19, 2024

Dear Chair Lavagnino and Board of Supervisors:

On behalf of the joint Criminal Justice Working Group of the League of Women Voters and Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice, we concur in Recommendation 1e of the current Grand Jury Report on Sheriff-Coroner Facilities filed on June 13, 2024, that “the entire Coroner’s facility shall be demolished and rebuilt.” The Sheriff-Coroner agreed in his July 31 response that “the facility is antiquated, in some ways substandard, and needs to be completely replaced.” He recommended that the County “should consider replacing the Coroner’s facility as a higher priority.”

The Calle Real Master Plan does not anticipate replacement of the coroner facilities until 2034 - 2039. The Grand Jury recommended that the Board fund development of a design and timeline this year. While we support the County’s current important priorities in the Calle Real plan, we also encourage the county to actively seek outside funding to enable replacement of the outdated coroner facilities as soon as possible.

In addition to the timeline concerns, we are uncertain whether replacement of the facility should occur within the Calle Real property or somewhere in North County for greater accessibility. We hope the Board will ask General Services to consider alternative locations.

We understand that the County is challenged by sizable deferred maintenance costs that now total over \$550 million including \$163 million that General Services needs in capital improvements. In order to speed progress on replacing the undersized and outmoded facility, we recommend the County seek outside federal, state or other funding.

Grand Jury reports from 2013, 2015, and 2020 have all called on the Board to replace these inadequate and outdated facilities. It is time to stop kicking the issue down the road. The 2013 Grand Jury report stated that the facility “merits a long-range strategic plan by the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors for the development of an accredited medical examiner department in an industry-standard facility with the capability of being accredited by

the National Association of Medical Examiners.” That report recommended that the Board of Supervisors:

...adopt the goal of establishing a facility and staff that are eligible for full accreditation by the National Association of Medical Examiners. A new, fully accredited facility would provide greater capability to address the challenges of twenty-first century America due to deaths related to natural disasters, man-made mass emergencies, issues related to Homeland Security and even perform a positive role in the burgeoning field of organ and tissue donation.

The 2020 Jury “found there is still an urgent need for a new facility that meets the industry standards of the 21st Century.” This year’s Grand Jury recommended replacing the Sheriff’s Coroner Office with an independent board certified Medical Examiner in their April 15 Report titled POTENTIAL PERCEIVED CONFLICT OF INTEREST FOR DEATH IN CUSTODY INVESTIGATIONS. We agree with this recommendation. Although this report has not come formally to the Board of Supervisors, we urge you to ask for it to be presented to you at a subsequent board hearing.

We appreciate the time and effort of this Board as well as our Administration and Departments to work collaboratively to meet the challenging facilities’ needs of our county and continually improve our criminal justice system.

Sincerely,

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CLUE-SB

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cc: Tanja Heitman, Bill Brown