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Grand Jury Criticizes Santa Maria's Approach to Battling Youth Violence

By Janene Scully, Noozhawk North County Editor | [@JaneneScully](#) | June 16, 2017 | 9:07 p.m.

The [Santa Barbara County Civil Grand Jury](#) (<http://www.sbcgj.org>) has criticized Santa Maria's program to quell youth violence, saying efforts to maintain control "could possibly perpetuate the cultural and socio-economic divides that exist in the city."

The panel's 7-page report, "[Youth Safety in Santa Maria: Developing a New Strategy](#)," (<http://www.sbcgj.org/2017/YouthSafetySM.pdf>) included six findings and recommendations, most directed at Mayor Alice Patino and the City Council. A couple were aimed at the [Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors](#). (<http://www.countyofsb.org/bos>)

After interviewing multiple people, grand jurors wrote in the report that several characterized Santa Maria as a city divided by occupations, social classes and ethnicities.

"The jury finds that the mayor's task force perpetuates that divide – those in the top tier will set the goals for those at the bottom," grand jurors concluded. "The at-risk youth and their families that the task force aims to help have little role in developing the envisioned changes and services that concern them. Inclusion of all citizens in this diverse community is essential for success."

City Manager Rick Haydon said he was disappointed in the grand jury report.

"I'm rather perplexed how they could come up with their conclusions since we're so early in the process," he said.

Grand jurors did commend the city, Patino and Fifth District county Supervisor Steve Lavagnino for tackling the youth violence after a series of slayings — claiming lives of those in their teens and early 20s in many cases — between late 2014 and early 2016.

The report looked at the city's approach, which differed from one sought by members of the grassroots group [One Community Action Coalition](#), (https://www.noozhawk.com/article/santa_maria_coalition_work_for_life_keep_youths_safe) whose members lobbied for an executive to oversee efforts.

Instead, the City Council chose to hire an outreach coordinator to work directly with youths and create the mayor's task force to oversee development and implementation of a strategic plan.

In addition to the task force, the city has a technical committee to act as "boots on the ground" in

implementing the strategic plan.

"I think everyone has a place at one of the tables," Haydon added.

Grand jurors also knocked the city for bypassing the coalition and independently hiring a consultant, the [California Cities Violence Prevention Network](http://www.thepartnerships.org/statewide-efforts/), which has assisted 14 California cities in crafting plans for prevention, intervention and enforcement.

One grand jury recommendation called for the city to strengthen its collaboration with the Board of Supervisors "to expand their ongoing support for a regional program under executive-level leadership."

Yet, that goes against the city's approach to avoid hiring an executive, Haydon added.

"We feel it's more advantageous to hire a coordinator to actually work the plan," Haydon said, adding that a philosophical difference exists between the city and the person who complained to the grand jury and wanted the executive level job.

Grand jury members attended the task force's first meeting, which primarily focused on introductions and organization.

Haydon said that first meeting took time to set up since organizers were trying to match schedules of the 50 members involved in the task force and representing law enforcement, schools, nonprofit groups, faith-based organizations and more.

A large group is key since factors behind youth violence span the spectrum, Haydon said.

"It's important to have that cross section in representation in the community from the stakeholders because it's not just one issue that we're dealing with," Haydon added.

Lavagnino did not return a call for comment Friday afternoon, but has participated in the task force. Additionally, Pete Flores from One Community Action also did not return a call for comment.

During the May meeting, task force members agreed to hold a variety of community meetings, with several already having taken place and two more planned, June 26 in Spanish and June 27 in English, both at 6:30 p.m. at the Veterans Memorial Community Center.

At an audience member's suggestion, one meeting also was held at a local resident's home.

The mayor's task force will hold its third meeting at 1:30 p.m. Monday at the [Santa Maria Public Library's Shepard Hall](http://cityofsantamaria.org/city-government/departments/library), with the [agenda included on the website](http://cityofsantamaria.org/city-government/departments/boards-commissions/mayor-s-task-force-on-youth-safety).

The civil grand jury, which operates as an arm of the [Santa Barbara County Superior Court](http://www.sbcourts.org), serves as a watchdog over numerous government agencies, cities and districts throughout Santa Barbara County, making recommendations after conducting investigations.

Both Santa Maria city and the Board of Supervisors have 90 days to formally respond to the panel's concerns

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