

Interim Presentment – January 2001

I. Introduction

The Special Grand Jury, a cross-section of Richmond County citizens, pursuant to its appointed duties, publishes this interim report on county operations. While upcoming presentments will deal with serious flaws, both in policy and in other levels of government, we are releasing this report to highlight problems prevalent throughout the consolidated government. These issues lead to major concerns regarding the structure of the government and the effectiveness of its elected officials. While the Grand Jury's task is far from complete, there is an urgency to express our growing unease about matters as they stand today. The Special Grand Jury is concerned that our government is on a path to destruction, and that action must be taken to avoid certain disaster. This report will deal with the following issues: a) the performance and attitudes of our elected officials and b) the present construction of the consolidated government. The Special Grand Jury then presents recommendations for the future.

II. The Commissioners - Role and Attitudes

Government, no matter the style or place, is only as effective and vital as the people we elect. In the Grand Jury's efforts, it has become painfully clear that the county commissioners are at the center of many problems. Frequently their actions reflect a disregard for the wellbeing of our community as a whole. In fact, these *servants of the people* often act in so shortsighted a manner that it divides the community. This leads to lingering doubts about their judgement and their dedication as leaders.

A. The role of a commissioner.

The proper role of a commissioner is to focus on "the big picture", such as setting the overall policy and priorities and directing the government through the County Administrator. The County Administrator and the department heads are responsible for daily operations. When elected officials try to influence or manage the daily workings of government, it bogs the system down and hinders employees in performing their duties. The Special Grand Jury has found that this is happening regularly, and commissioners routinely ignore chain of command, often giving orders directly to county employees. For example, one commissioner in particular has directly involved himself in personnel matters. He regularly questions supervisors about evaluations and disciplinary actions concerning employees he favors. Employees have even stated, "I work for [a commissioner], not the county." Indeed, there have been examples of department heads disregarding direct orders from the County Administrator, because they "knew" they "already had five votes on the commission."

Another example of commissioner meddling took place in mid-2000, when there was a dispute over the cell phone charges generated by a former department head. The County Administrator, as is his responsibility, instructed the Accounting Department (as is their explicit responsibility) to audit these cell phone bills and then charge the former employee for any personal calls. At this point, a commissioner involved himself in the process and insisted that the Clerk of Commission take part in the audit. This was outside the scope of her responsibilities, and she quickly removed herself. Then the commissioner instructed the Director of Purchasing to become involved in the audit. In