

New Charges Against City Hall

ISSUE: Can municipal government be made indictment-proof, or must the Grand Jury continue to keep one foot in City Hall?

Two more indictments have resulted from the latest Grand Jury investigation of alleged City Hall scandal and misconduct. And the probe seems far from finished.

City Councilman Thomas Shepard and ex-Commissioner Mel Pierson were added to the list of municipal officials indicted within the past year—which includes five commission members appointed by Mayor Yorty.

Four of these were implicated in the Harbor Commission's awarding of a questionable \$12 million contract, which was the subject of a prolonged inquiry by a Times investigative team.

Although Mayor Yorty called the Times series a "smear," two of his Harbor Commission appointees, Robert Nick Starr and Karl Rundberg, have been convicted of bribery. The two other commissioners, George Watson and Keith Smith, are awaiting adjudication of their cases.

Councilman Shepard and Pierson, lately of the Recreation and Park Commission, were charged Thursday with bribery and conspiracy in rezoning cases.

But the whole system of city planning and zoning procedures is already on trial.

The 1966 Grand Jury warned that land use decisions are highly vulnerable to improper pressures: "Influence can and has been and in all probability will be exerted through the medium of campaign contributions, political obligations and friendships."

The extent to which conflict of interest had infected the Planning Commission and Board of Zoning Adjustment was doc-

umented by The Times last year in a series of articles that eventually led to numerous changes in membership.

And earlier this year a citizens committee headed by the late Mayor Fletcher Bowron made sweeping recommendations for planning and zoning reform.

The case against Shepard primarily was based upon three rezoning denials by the Planning Commission that were later overturned by the Council. In the fourth case, Mayor Yorty withdrew his veto from a rezoning action by the Council.

Without an up-to-date general plan or comprehensive zoning ordinance (both long overdue), the city lacks the kind of protective guidelines needed for land use decisions. Bad rezoning can ruin a neighborhood or create great profits for the applicant—or both.

"Over a period of 20 years," said the Bowron committee, "the bad, if not illegal, practice of piecemeal or spot changing of zoning patterns has evolved, resulting in a hodgepodge of land uses . . . contrary to basic principles of sound city planning."

Proper master planning must then be implemented by effective administration and interpretation. This means straightening and strengthening the legislative, administrative and quasi-judicial functions in the planning-zoning process.

Dozens of recommendations for zoning reform were made by the Bowron committee. They should have the most careful scrutiny by the commissions and the Council.

But in the final analysis, the system will always depend upon the men who make it function.

Quality of municipal government, therefore, is the responsibility of the electorate, the mayor and the City Council—or the Grand Jury, if the selection process fails.