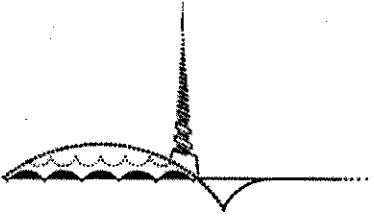


Marin County Civil Grand Jury



TO: Harold C. Brown, President
Marin County Board of Supervisors

FROM: Jeff Skov, Foreperson
2008-2009 Marin County Civil Grand Jury

DATE: June 12, 2009

SUBJECT: **Walker Creek Ranch**

The attached is an informational report being released today to the press and public by the Marin County Civil Grand Jury. Unlike most Grand Jury reports, this one does not contain Findings and Recommendations. Instead, there are Conclusions describing what we consider to be a valuable community asset.

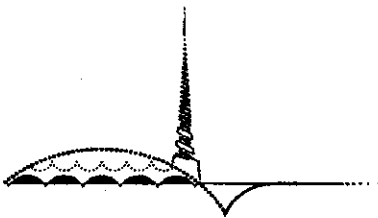
Normally, you are notified of our reports a few days prior to public release. Since this is an informational report involving Conclusions, rather than specific Findings and Recommendations, we were not required to do so. Because of the recent actions involving budget cuts, we feel it is particularly timely to release it now.

Since this is an informational report, you are not required to respond. But, as always, your comments are welcome.

Thanks very much.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeff Skov". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and "S".

Marin County Civil Grand Jury



TO: Matthew Hymel
County Administrator

FROM: Jeff Skov, Foreperson
2008-2009 Marin County Civil Grand Jury

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SUBJECT: **Walker Creek Ranch**

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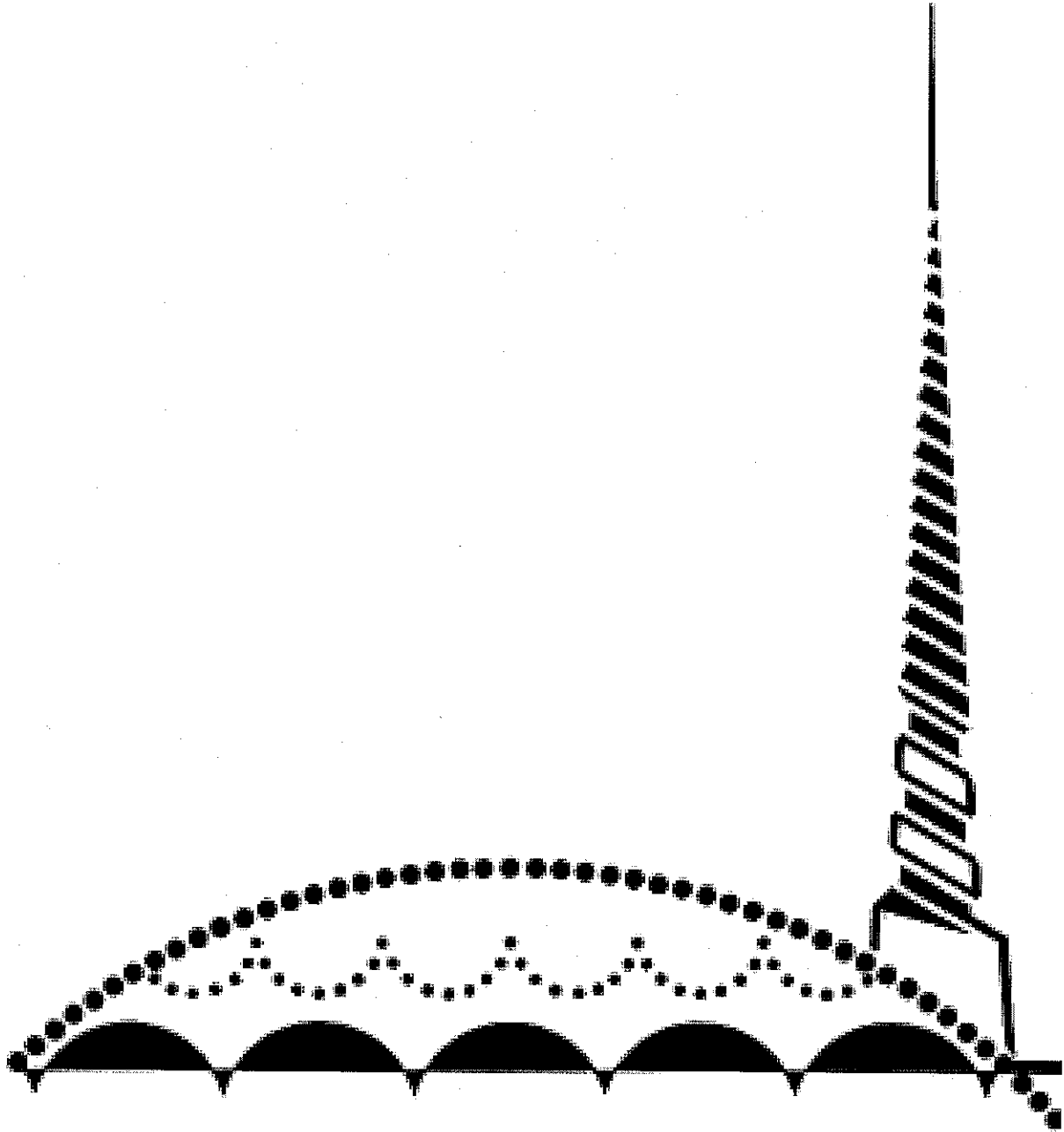
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2008-2009 MARIN COUNTY CIVIL GRAND JURY

**Walker Creek Ranch:
No child left inside
June 11, 2009**



Marin County Civil Grand Jury



SUMMARY

In 1992 and 1993 the Grand Juries examined Walker Creek Ranch, an outdoor education facility operated by the Marin County Office of Education. The Grand Juries noted that the facility was losing money, that there was no long-range business plan, that the accounting system was inadequate and that those managing the property were not trained about for-profit operations. They concluded that it might become a drain on the taxpayers of Marin.

When this year's Grand Jury looked into present-day operations at Walker Creek Ranch, it found a self-sufficient profit-making facility that runs three successful programs: a residential outdoor school, a conference center and a summer camp. This Grand Jury believes that the ranch is an asset to the County Office of Education and Marin County. More importantly, the outdoor education program is outstanding.

But the ranch is not immune to the financial crisis facing California's schools. School districts facing draconian budget cuts have reduced the number of students they will send to the outdoor program in the year ahead. Enrollment is down by 400 students, and the outdoor education program may be idle for as many as five weeks next year. Accordingly, the Office of Education on June 9, 2009, voted to eliminate a position at Walker Creek Ranch and cut hours of the naturalist staff.

A spokesperson for the County Office of Education has publicly stated that the outdoor education program will stay intact despite the cutbacks, which it hopes will be temporary. It is the Grand Jury's hope that the Marin County Office of Education ensures that Walker Creek Ranch is properly staffed and is able to continue as the valuable community asset described in this report.

BACKGROUND

In 1992 and 1993 the Grand Juries issued reports on the operation of Walker Creek Ranch. The property was deeded to the County Office of Education in 1990 as a site for its outdoor education program. The 1992 and 1993 Grand Juries were concerned that the facility might be a burden on the taxpayers of Marin County because it had been run at a deficit in its early years. The 2008-2009 Grand Jury decided to follow-up on the earlier reports to see what progress had been made over the years and to determine what types of programs and services are currently offered at the ranch.

METHODOLOGY

In addition to reviewing the 1992 and 1993 reports, this Grand Jury:

- Interviewed administrators and staff at Walker Creek Ranch.
- Reviewed its financial records and five-year business plan.
- Toured the facility.
- Reviewed evaluations by teachers from Bay Area schools who had participated in the outdoor education program.
- Reviewed the activity calendar/schedule from August 2008 through June 2009.
- Reviewed the menus and recipes for the outdoor education program.
- Reviewed the organization's mission statements, various printed brochures of informational material and its website (www.walkercreekranch.org).

DISCUSSION

Walker Creek Ranch is located on a 1,741-acre bucolic site in West Marin about two miles from Tomales Bay. When members of the Grand Jury visited the ranch, the hills were green and the creek was running, trees were budding, plants were flourishing in the vegetable garden and, of course, the birds were singing.

History of the land

The land was first inhabited by the Coastal Miwoks. There were approximately 3,000 Coastal Miwoks living and thriving in the area when Sir Francis Drake anchored off the Marin coast in 1579. By the mid-19th century the tribe had been devastated by measles and syphilis and the population was down to 60. Remnants of the society are still found on the land. At the side of the road, near the entrance to the Walker Creek property, there is a huge grinding stone used by the tribe to grind acorns into meal. On display at the ranch's museum are smaller grinding stones, bowls, arrowheads and other Miwok artifacts that were discovered on the site.

By the mid-1800s the site and surrounding land had become dairy ranches and remained as such until the 1960s when Synanon, a controversial drug treatment residential community, bought a total of three properties in the area, including what is now Walker Creek Ranch. Synanon used part of the property to build residences, meeting rooms and other necessary structures for its members who lived there and numbered almost 1,500 in the community's heyday. Synanon also constructed a sewage system and a water storage/treatment/distribution system that are still in use. The San Francisco Foundation, now Marin Community Foundation, which administered the Buck Fund, bought the three

properties from Synanon. The foundation deeded the Walker Creek property to the Marin County Office of Education for use as a residential outdoor education facility.

The property lay vacant during the 1980s after the Synanon community left the county. Before the Office of Education acquired the land it was aware that many of the buildings would need to be refurbished or rebuilt in order to establish a viable outdoor education facility. It decided to accept the property and to improve it for use as an outdoor school and a conference center. It committed about \$2 million of county school funds to the project and was awarded a \$1.8 million grant from the Marin Community Foundation. Most of that grant went into building a large, modern dining hall and kitchen.

The land today

At 1,741 acres, the ranch is almost twice the size of San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. The heart of the ranch is a 40-acre flat site where the main buildings are located. The site includes dormitory cabins for the students, cabins for teachers, lodges for the conference center, a large centrally located bath house, meeting rooms, museum, dining room, offices, barn, residences for staff who live on the property and a campground that can accommodate up to 200 people. It also includes an amphitheater, a vegetable garden, ball fields and a corral and barn for goats and sheep. Walker Creek runs through the property and there is also a four-acre pond for nature study, irrigation and swimming in the summer. The Marin County Office of Education recently opened Camp Soulajule at the ranch, a residential summer camp for children aged 8-12. It runs for three weeks in July.

Most of the acreage is rolling hills. The Marin Agriculture Land Trust has an easement on the property for grazing cattle. A local rancher leases about 1,200 acres for grazing and pays fair market value for this use. The remaining acreage is heavily wooded.

There are 13 basic, clean dormitory cabins for the students with sturdy bunk beds. Children bring their own sleeping bags or bedding. All buildings on the property have propane forced-air heating.

Quite apart from its outdoor education and Camp Soulajule programs for youngsters, the ranch also operates a conference center with slightly more upscale facilities for retreats, meetings, weddings and special events. The revenue from these activities is an important part of the ranch's financial success. The guest lodges are plainly furnished with single beds and chests of drawers in the bedrooms. Linens are provided. The living room area in the lodge that the Grand Jury looked at had comfortable seating and a small kitchen. All the buildings are well maintained, both outside and inside.

Outdoor education at Walker Creek Ranch

Education about the natural environment is a California state curriculum requirement, although it can be taught in the classroom. Each school district determines if the curriculum will be taught in a classroom setting or at an off-campus outdoor residential

facility. When taught in an outdoor setting, the curriculum is normally followed up with classroom work when the students return to their schools.

The mission statement of the ranch reads: "The Marin County Outdoor School at Walker Creek Ranch is dedicated to helping elementary schools satisfy their educational goals through quality instruction within a special learning environment that inspires and motivates students to achieve an appreciation and understanding of the natural world. Using the principles of thematic instruction, the Outdoor School program enhances a student's critical thinking, processing, and socialization skills."

The ranch offers a four- or five-day residential program for fifth- and sixth-graders and serves public, private and parochial schools throughout Northern and Central California. The residential outdoor education experience enriches the lives of children by providing learning opportunities that can't be matched in a regular classroom. Students get a hands-on experience with environmental science by learning in the natural habitats at the ranch, which include a pond, creeks, bay woodlands and coastal scrub chaparral. There are 20 miles of hiking trails and abundant wildlife. Off-site visits to the beach or the redwoods can also be arranged.

The ranch can accommodate 220 students per week. Usually the children come from different schools and often from different school districts. Instruction has been provided by a staff of 11 naturalists, all credentialed teachers. The students are broken up into small groups upon arrival and each group is assigned its own naturalist. Every group is made up of children from different schools and all are encouraged to reach out and make new friends. For many of the students this is their first time away from home and their first experience with nature. In addition to exploring and learning about the environment at the main part of the ranch, the children are taken on hikes along the creeks and up into the hills.

The students are introduced to the Walker Creek habitats soon after they get to the ranch with an "arrival day hike." Parents are asked to make sure their children arrive dressed for hiking and with a back pack, bag lunch, water and sunscreen. Each school is asked to provide parent volunteers to accompany students on that first day hike -- one parent per 20 students. After the buses are unloaded, the children, parents, naturalists and other staff gather at the outdoor amphitheater for a short orientation. The naturalists introduce themselves and talk about the activities for the coming week. Last year, each student was assigned to a naturalist who led his or her group of 16-20 youngsters throughout the week. After the children have stowed their belongings in their assigned cabins, the first hike begins. The groups hike separately so the students can get to know each other and their naturalist. During the hike the naturalist talks about the different habitats they walk through and gives each child a journal to complete while they are at the ranch.

During the week, in addition to the daily trail activities with the naturalists, there is always a night hike and one steep hike to the top of Mount Walker that the students take come rain or shine. Rain gear is provided for those in need of it. These hikes can be challenging experiences for some children who are not used to the outdoors, but also are

very rewarding experiences and a boost to self-confidence when a student is able to say, "I did it!" For many of the children, especially those who have not been away from home before, the experience at the ranch gives them an opportunity to take responsibility for themselves and gain a new sense of independence.

The evening activities include the night hike, a barn dance, a campfire and a town hall meeting. At the town hall meeting, students learn analytical thinking by being presented with an environmental issue to discuss. Should your town use open space for development, for recreational purposes or is there another alternative? Arguments are presented by the students, such as: our town needs revenue, let's develop the land; preserving the environment is more important, people need to be in touch with nature. One of the naturalists told the Grand Jury that he was always relieved when the final vote reflected that the different points of view were carefully and thoughtfully considered.

Members of the Grand Jury visited Walker Creek Ranch on a Friday and saw part of the closing ceremony for that week's students. The naturalists encouraged each child to talk about what he or she had experienced during the week. Some of their comments were:

- I came here to have fun and learn more about nature.
- I was a "fraidy cat" and now I'm brave.
- I learned what it's like to live without electronics.
- I got to know animals and their habitats.
- I made new friends and saw new things.
- I got over my fear of the dark.
- I learned to hike and get out in nature.
- This was my first time in the wilderness and I hope to have more adventures.

The whole group sang a song called "Shot Through My Life Like a Shooting Star." The song typified how significant a single experience can be in shaping the life of an individual and it encouraged embracing new relationships.

Safety and supervision

The number one priority for the staff at the ranch is ensuring the physical and emotional safety and well-being of the children while they are at the facility. Children are supervised round the clock by the naturalists, their teachers and cabin leaders. Teachers are required to be at the ranch with their classroom students for the week. They have their own lodges. Their primary role is that of caregiver and they deal with behavior problems, homesickness, medications and other individual needs of their students.

Teachers collaborate with the naturalists to optimize the learning experience of the children. They do not teach but meet with their students for a chat every afternoon after the day's trail activities with the naturalists are over.

Each school is required to provide cabin leaders – a minimum of one per nine students. Students are assigned to cabin groups of eight to 12 and each group is supervised by either a parent or high school student volunteer. The cabin leader sleeps in the dormitory with his or her group of children and accompanies them on all ranch activities during the day and evening.

Ranch staff manages security and emergencies and has emergency medical technicians on site. There is a 24-hour security team and all staff have been trained in emergency procedures for fire, earthquakes, evacuation and other calamities.

Nutrition

Members of the Grand Jury were impressed with the Food Services Manager. She is dedicated to preparing child-friendly meals with an emphasis on seasonal, fresh and local ingredients. The Nutrition Services Division of the California Department of Education has many rules and restrictions regarding meals in an educational facility. Most of the approved state recipes and menus involve canned and packaged ingredients that have nutritional values on their labels. The Food Services Manager has spent a great deal of time researching the nutritional values of the fresh, organic foods she prefers to serve to show that they are equivalent to the foods prescribed by the state. The nutritional analysis she does for each of her recipes must list calories, proteins, carbohydrates, fat/saturated fat, vitamins A and C, and iron, and must show how it contributes to the meal pattern required by the state. Other school districts that wish to serve fresh, locally grown food are now asking for her advice on menus.

Food is served buffet style, encouraging children to try new foods. They are required to bus their own tables, separate trash for recycling and separate leftover, organic scraps for composting.

Teacher's evaluations

The Grand Jury reviewed teacher evaluations of the outdoor education program. Here are some of their comments:

- Staff was outstanding at communicating with the students and cabin leaders followed their example. Well done.
- Great time for students to get out of their comfort zone and interact with new peers.
- All students were engaged and were able to grasp the content taught.

- Students can't stop talking about what they learned.
- Very diverse student interactions. Great for social skills.
- I saw more growth in the students than ever before.
- Food is amazing, veggie options super.
- Fantastic memories for the students.

Fees

The 2009-2010 fees to attend the five-day outdoor education program at Walker Creek Ranch range from \$265 to \$299 per student and from \$185 to \$215 per teacher, depending on the time of the year. The fees for the four-day program are \$235 to \$269 per student and \$155 to \$185 per teacher. The fees cover instruction, lodging, meals/snacks, student health and accident insurance and instructional materials. In the past, some schools, usually in the more affluent neighborhoods, raised enough money through efforts by their PTAs or other parent groups to cover all the costs for the week – students, teachers and transportation. The County Office of Education has stated that this year, with the current budget crisis, fund raising may target basic academic programs, as opposed to outdoor education. Other schools struggle to raise money and must ask parents to provide part of the costs. One administrator at a school in a low-income area told the Grand Jury that he starts talking to parents about the outdoor education program the year before their children will attend. He tells them how much it will cost, how valuable it is and how important it is for them to start planning and setting aside money.

The fees for 8- to 12-year-olds to attend Camp Soulajule are \$425 for the four-day session and \$525 for five days. The camp also runs a junior counselor program that gives 13- to 15-year olds an opportunity to learn leadership and team-building skills while working with the younger campers. The fees for this program are \$250 for four days and \$325 for five days. Local Rotary Clubs and the Marin Community Foundation have provided over \$200,000 in scholarships in the past several years for disadvantaged Marin County children to attend Camp Soulajule. The scholarship program is coordinated with the schools in an effort to identify and nurture leadership qualities in disadvantaged students.

Fees for the conference center range from \$57.50 per day for camping to \$112.50 per day for a semi-private room, and include three meals, use of a meeting room and sales tax.

Financial self-sufficiency

In 1992 the Grand Jury found that expenditures at the ranch exceeded revenues and concluded that it might become a drain on the taxpayers of Marin County.

Walker Creek Ranch opened for business in the summer of 1990 and operated at a deficit during the following five years or so while new programs were being developed and expanded. In fiscal year 1997, revenues exceeded expenses and have continued to do so to the present. Between 1997 and 2004, the ranch was able to build a substantial reserve fund of \$1.1 million.

In 2004 the Marin County Board of Education approved a five-year business plan for the ranch. A portion of the \$1.1 million reserve was used to make major improvements to the facilities in order to achieve optimal and sustainable program activity. Now that the improvements have been made, the Board of Education hopes to rebuild its reserve that, in any case, has never fallen below \$400,000 since 1996-1997. The actual reserve at the end of year four of the business plan in 2008 was a little over \$531,000.

A review of the ranch's financial records shows that in 2008 just over half of its revenue came from fees for the outdoor education program. The remainder came from charges for the conference center and Camp Soulajule, sales from the ranch store and the lease for cattle grazing. The ranch does not receive any state education money for its operation. Salaries and benefits for the staff account for the majority of its expenditures. The property does not have a mortgage and there are no property taxes. Profits from all its operations go into the reserve fund. Administrators at the Office of Education told the Grand Jury that at least \$400,000 should be maintained in that fund for emergencies. The business plan determines how reserve funds will be used. Major purchases, new projects and improvements must be approved by the Marin County Superintendent of Schools and the Marin County Board of Education. The budget is audited annually by the Board of Education and the state.

Walker Creek Ranch became financially stable in 1996 and since 2004 there has been a steady increase in revenue. A review of the activity calendar and schedule from August 2008 through July 2009 shows very few days of down time. In the past, most weeks during the school year were fully booked for the outdoor education program. The conference center is at least partially booked on most weekends throughout the year. It has 350 beds available in lodges and dormitories and can accommodate large groups and multiple groups on weekends and for full weeks in the summer when Camp Soulajule is not in session. Staff at the ranch told the Grand Jury that they believe that the conference center is a wonderful resource for the community and they hope to attract more groups to the facility. The yearly revenue for the conference center has increased from about \$568,000 in 2004 to \$868,000 in 2008. Ninety percent of advertising and promotion for the center is by word of mouth. The remainder is through listings with local chambers of commerce, the ranch's website and informational brochures.

There are discounts for groups over 100 and discounts for specific times of the year.

Goals

Short-term goals for Walker Creek Ranch in place at the time of this report are:

- Maintain the course set out in the five-year business plan and operate at an optimum and sustainable level of program activity.
- Remain financially self-sufficient.
- Become a Marin County Certified Green Business and position itself as a leader in the community in this area.

Long-term goals are:

- Broaden its role as a regional provider for both school and conference services, including attracting more Marin County schools.
- Position itself as a resource for teacher training programs.
- Maintain and bolster infrastructure to meet future needs.
- Continue to support and obtain community-based and legislative mechanisms to provide funding support for economically disadvantaged students to participate in outdoor school programs.

Administrators at the ranch believe that it will get certification as a green business by July 1, 2009. The staff has implemented an aggressive recycling and composting program; developed a thriving organic garden; installed solar panels, which power the well pumps for the water distribution system; completed an energy audit conducted by Marin Energy Management Team; replaced most fluorescent bulbs with more energy-efficient bulbs and updated the Hazardous Waste Business Plan to incorporate waste oil disposal. Once staff completes the installation of energy-efficient bulbs, the ranch will be ready for the inspection that would lead to a green business certificate.

CONCLUSIONS

The Grand Jury believes that Walker Creek Ranch operates an outstanding outdoor school education program for children in Marin and other Bay Area counties. The curriculum covers the required California science standards, but learning it in the environment at the ranch provides the students with experiences that they could never get in a classroom. Children not only receive a hands-on appreciation and understanding of nature, they learn responsibility and independence and gain self-confidence.

The Grand Jury concludes that the administrator and staff at the ranch are fulfilling their commitment to ensure the safety and well-being of the children under their care. We

commend them also for their innovative nutritional policy, their recycling and composting efforts and use of solar power.

The Grand Jury notes that the ranch's revenues have exceeded expenditures since 1996 and that it has maintained a reserve fund of at least \$400,000 since that time. It is our hope that sufficient funds can be allocated in the year ahead to ensure that Walker Creek Ranch is properly staffed and is able to continue as the valuable community asset described in this report.

The Grand Jury believes that many underprivileged children have benefited by attending Camp Soulajule. We urge local civic organizations and the Marin Community Foundation to continue to support the program. We also believe that the conference center is a valuable asset to the County and Bay Area. It may be under-used at present, but it is showing a profit and we urge staff to look for more ways to promote and advertise its activities. This could be accomplished by outreach and presentations to community organizations and groups that hold retreats and off-site conferences.

We commend the Marin County Office of Education for successfully operating this valuable community asset.

RESPONSES

This is an informational report only. Responses are neither required nor requested.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person, or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury. The California State Legislature has stated that it intends the provisions of Penal Code Section 929 prohibiting disclosure of witness identities to encourage full candor in testimony in Civil Grand Jury investigations by protecting the privacy and confidentiality of those who participate in any Civil Grand Jury investigation.