



COUNTY OF HUMBOLDT

For the meeting of: 10/21/2025

File #: 25-1164

To: Board of Supervisors

From: County Administrative Office

Agenda Section: Consent

Vote Requirement: Majority

SUBJECT:

Fiscal Year 2024-25 Grand Jury Responses: "Wings Over Humboldt County: Charting a New Course for the Department of Aviation," "Scales of Justice Out of Balance: Humboldt County Public Defender's Office," and "Built to Burn? Emergency Access Challenges on Humboldt Hill"

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Board of Supervisors:

1. Review and modify as necessary the proposed Grand Jury responses from the Board of Supervisors (Attachments 2, 4 and 6); and
2. Approve the documents, as may be modified, as the response; and
3. Direct the Clerk of the Board, within five working days, to submit two copies of all attached responses to the County Clerk/Recorder, together with a copy of the original reports; and
4. Direct the Clerk of the Board, within five working days, to submit two copies of attached responses to the Clerk of the Court, one of which will be forward to the State Archivist, together with a copy of the original reports.

STRATEGIC PLAN:

This action supports the following areas of your Board's Strategic Plan.

Area of Focus: Core Services/Other

Strategic Plan Category: 9999 - Core Services/Other

DISCUSSION:

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury investigates and reports on the operations, accounts, and records of the officers, departments or functions of the County of Humboldt and other local government agencies. The county sincerely thanks the Grand Jury for its hard work and efforts they have put forth in their 2024-25 Grand Jury reports.

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury has submitted nine Fiscal Year 2024-25 reports to the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court, of which eight pertained to the County of Humboldt and were received. Your Board approved responses to five of these reports at a previous meeting on Tuesday, Sept. 23, 2025. The remaining three reports that require responses from your Board come before your Board today.

The following reports that require responses from your Board today include:

1. "Wings Over Humboldt County: Charting a New Course for the Department of Aviation" (Attachment 1)

The Civil Grand Jury investigated the Department of Aviation and how it operates the county's six airports. The Grand Jury required the Board of Supervisors to respond to all 12 findings and all six recommendations in this report.

Summary of Findings

The Civil Grand Jury found that the creation of the Department of Aviation has improved management and operations across Humboldt County's six airports, creating opportunities for growth and increased revenue. Aviation staff ensure public safety and compliance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) regulations, which is necessary for securing grant funding. In 2024, the department received nearly \$1.9 million in FAA grants for airport improvements.

The Grand Jury found that expanding commercial air service to the north could bring in additional revenue by keeping more local passengers, and the Aviation Department is partnering with the County Administrative Office's Economic Development Division to explore economic development opportunities through Project SOAR.

Additionally, Grand Jury found several airports face significant infrastructure challenges, including the Dinsmore landing strip, Kneeland's runway and the overall condition of Murray Field. Many smaller airport hangars and other infrastructure have also deteriorated due to years of deferred maintenance, driving up repair costs and frustrating tenants.

Finally, the Grand Jury found that many recommendations made in an aviation study 2017 report by Volaire Aviation Consulting have been implemented, revisiting the remaining recommendations could further improve county airport operations and revenue. The Grand Jury also found that expanding the Aviation Advisory Committee's focus beyond operations to include broader economic development strategies could be beneficial.

Summary of Recommendations

The Grand Jury has recommended your Board support ongoing efforts to increase airport revenue by continuing with Project SOAR and evaluating the role of the Aviation Advisory Committee.

The Grand Jury has also recommended that the Department of Aviation review and revisit recommendations from the 2017 Volaire report, particularly relating to the Murray Field, Dinsmore and Kneeland airports, and present a plan for implementing such recommendations by Dec. 31, 2025. Additionally, the Grand Jury recommends the development of a comprehensive plan to repair and upgrade airport hangars to commercial standards by Dec. 31, 2025. Finally, the Grand Jury recommends that your Board allocate all hangar rental revenue and seek additional funding sources, as needed, to implement the hangar repair plan developed by the Department of Aviation by June 30, 2026.

Attachment 2 is the proposed Board of Supervisors response to this report.

2. "Scales of Justice Out of Balance: Humboldt County Public Defender's Office" (Attachment 3)

The Civil Grand Jury investigated the Humboldt County Public Defender's Office facility, policies, staffing and practices. The Grand Jury required the Board of Supervisors to respond to all 20 findings and all 20 recommendations in this report.

Summary of Findings

The Humboldt County Civil Grand Jury found that the Public Defender's Office consistently delivers competent and effective legal services, achieving strong case outcomes in 2024 despite high caseloads and limited resources. Staff are highly dedicated to their work, with very few client complaints and only one time in the past three years has an attorney been removed from a case due to inadequate assistance of counsel. The Grand Jury noted that this establishes that the Public Defender's Office is competently and effectively serving their clients.

The Grand Jury found that the facility housing the Public Defender's Office is in poor condition and that deferred maintenance on infrastructure, lack of resources and ineffective administrative processes undermine the offices' ability to serve the community effectively.

Further, the Grand Jury found that recruitment and retention are hindered by non-competitive wages, particularly compared to the higher pay and greater resources available to the District Attorney's Office. The Grand Jury alleges this disparity places the Public Defender's and Conflict Counsel's offices at a disadvantage, leading to high turnover and low staff morale. Both offices also face

excessive caseloads that strain staff well-being and contribute to burnout. The Grand Jury also notes that the county's lengthy hiring process further exacerbates these challenges by delaying the filling of vacant positions.

Additional concerns include the lack of video equipment for investigators, limited training for new hires, inadequate supervision and performance reviews, the absence of departmental policy and procedure manuals and the lack of a permanent social worker position.

Summary of Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that Humboldt County take significant steps to improve the working conditions, pay and resources of the Public Defender's and Conflict Counsel's offices.

Recommendations include relocating the Public Defender's Office to an Americans with Disability Act compliant building and adding safety measures such as security barriers.

To address wage disparities, the Grand Jury recommends increasing attorney, investigator and support staff pay to bring compensation in line with the District Attorney's Office. Additional staffing is also recommended, including more attorneys, investigators and analysts, to reduce caseloads. Recommendations also include establishing permanent social worker positions in both offices and streamlining the county's hiring process so that non-management positions are filled within six weeks.

The recommendations further call for formal training programs, management plans for investigators and regular staff performance reviews to strengthen oversight and efficiency. Finally, the Grand Jury urges the creation of comprehensive departmental policy and procedures manuals and suggests allowing emotional support dogs in the offices until formal mental health and counseling services can be provided to staff. Many of these actions are recommended to be completed or funded by mid-2026.

Attachment 4 is the proposed Board of Supervisors response to this report.

3. "Built to Burn? Emergency Access Challenges on Humboldt Hill" (Attachment 5)

The Civil Grand Jury investigated the potential for wildfire evacuation risk in the Humboldt Hill area. The Grand Jury required the Board of Supervisors to respond to Finding 2 and 3 and Recommendation 3 and 4.

Summary of Findings

The Grand Jury found that residents of Humboldt Hill currently have no secondary evacuation route, putting them at risk during emergencies. However, a proposed subdivision includes plans for a secondary access road, which would improve safety if completed.

Summary of Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the Board of Supervisors work with private landowners and public utilities to secure an emergency access route for Humboldt Hill residents. It also recommends that the Board direct county staff to speed up the approval of the new subdivision plan to provide this emergency access.

Attachment 6 is the proposed Board of Supervisors response to this report.

The county sincerely thanks the Grand Jury for the time and effort put into these reports. The county also thanks its Departments of Aviation, Human Resources, Planning & Building, Public Works, the Public Defender's Office, Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services and County Administrative Office for contributing to the proposed responses before your Board today.

SOURCE OF FUNDING:

General Fund (1100)

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There is no financial impact to providing a response outside of the significant amount of staff time it takes to research and prepare the Board's proposed responses to each report. The Commission on State Mandates issued a decision in 2002 that certain elements involving the Grand Jury imposes a reimbursable state-mandated program (including providing comments to Grand Jury reports, providing training and consultation, meeting with the Grand Jury, providing a meeting room and support for the Grand Jury),

however, the Legislature in 2006 suspended reimbursement payments, making these duties unfunded mandates for the county.

Some individual responses may require additional expenditures.

STAFFING IMPACT:

Some individual responses may impact staff with increased workload.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT:

Those referenced in the Grand Jury reports.

ALTERNATIVES TO STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:

The Board may elect to modify any responses pertaining to matters under its control.

ATTACHMENTS:

1. Aviation Report
2. Aviation Report - Board of Supervisors Response
3. Public Defender's Office Report
4. Public Defender's Office Report - Board of Supervisors Response
5. Humboldt Hill Emergency Access Report
6. Humboldt Hill Emergency Access Report - Board of Supervisors Response

PREVIOUS ACTION/REFERRAL:

Meeting of: Sept. 23, 2025

File No.: N/A