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County commissioners in Hawaii with our money

Aloha, Gene and Buzz!

by Michael Moore

Faced with a four million dollar deficit in the county budget, and possible layoffs of up to 200 people, five members of the Genesee County Board of Commissioners are off on a trip this month to Hawaii, courtesy of the taxpayers.

Commissioners Eugene Kovacs (Burton), Norman D. Buzz Harlan (Davison), John Trecha (Swartz Creek), Harold Hayden (Flint), and Charlotte Williams (Flint) are spending over eight thousand dollars to attend the Western Regional Conference of the National Association of Counties.

Michigan, of course, is not a part of the Western Region.

The purpose of the conference is "to study community development." This led one member of the UAW's "Watchdog Committe" to remark that "the commissioners are probably going to Hawaii to study the effects upon a group of people who are forced to live year-round in constant 80 degree temperatures."

Not so, claim the commissioners.

They insist that these conferences give them a chance to meet important people and discuss highly relevant issues.

"If you don't go to these conferences, then you're not doing your job," Norman D. "Buzz" Harlan of Davison proclaimed. Harlan is one of the county's biggest travelers, having already visited Hawaii once before in addition to Las Vegas and Miami Beach. Last year alone he spent over four thousand dollars in public funds on various junkets around the country.

In fact, in the past three years over \$80,000 has been spent for personal trips to conventions and conferences by the Board of Commissioners.

During that same period, the commissioners failed to return \$31,000 of "pocket change" that they didn't spend on their trips. Each of them simply kept the money. Although no criminal charges were pressed against them for this theft, they did return most of it after the UAW's investigation exposed their corruption.

Last month, the commissioners laid off a number of employees in the

prosecutor's and treasurer's offices and then voted themselves a pay increase. They also eliminated the restriction of 200 meetings per year they could attend and be paid for. The commissioners, all of whom have other full time jobs or sources of income, will be paid \$8,000 a year, plus \$35 for every meeting, plus a quarterly "cost of living" check, plus retirement and insurance benefits. This will give each of the part-time commissioners in excess of \$20,000 in salary this year, not counting the thousands they will each spend on their travels.

Commissioner Eugene B. Kovacs of Burton refused to speak to the VOICE about his trip to Hawaii or his other financial dealings as a commissioner. When Kovacs originally ran for the board in 1976, he promised "to take no trips at taxpayer's expense." He is taking his wife along on this trip.

Kovacs, Hayden, and Williams represent three of the poorest sections of Genesee County, according to U.S. government statistics.

Hayden is the biggest traveler on the board, spending over \$6,000 last year.

The commissioners are staying in a resort hotel on Kauai at \$63.00 a night.

After the five day conference, most will stay with their wives for "an extended vacation" on the island paradise where the average temperature in February is 78 degrees.

Public reaction to the junket has been minimal as most people were unaware of the trip until it was too late to do anything about it. (The Flint Journal was present at the January 23rd meeting where the trip was voted on and passed. They did not report it, though, until January 31, over a week after it occurred and three days before the commissioners were to leave. The VOICE learned of the trip on the 23rd also but, unfortunately, we publish only once a month.)

Frank Goodroe, county board coordinator, asked that the VOICE not to publish the facts surrounding the commissioner's trip to Hawaii.

"It would be helpful if you didn't print this," Goodroe told us. "The commissioners—especially Mr. and Mrs. Kovacs—are afraid that if people knew they were gone to Hawaii, someone may break in and vandalize their homes."

The laid-off county employees could not be reached for comment.