

**From:** karen Eldridge [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Tuesday, July 4, 2023 2:31 PM  
**To:** -- City Council <--CityCouncil@cityofpetaluma.org>  
**Subject:** Accountability and Transparency needed

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July 4, 2023

Dear Petaluma City Council Members,

I have lived in Petaluma for over 40 years and raised my 2 children here. Both of my adult children still live in Petaluma and own property here. We are fortunate to live in such a unique and beautiful community.

Recently, I read the 2022-2023 Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury report regarding the City of Petaluma and its relationship with M Group. I had no idea that the M Group was so entrenched in the city government of Petaluma. I encourage everyone to read the report.

<https://sonoma.courts.ca.gov/system/files/grand-jury/final-consolidate-grand-jury-report-2022-2023.pdf>

The title preceding the report reads:

**Outsourcing Petaluma Planning Department**

**Is it Better or Easier?**

**According to the Sonoma Civil Grand Jury report, the city of Petaluma has outsourced its planning department to a private firm, M Group, for the last 14 years with no performance reviews, audits, or cost analysis on various projects. There have been no assessments as to whether the arrangement of M Group has been cost effective.**

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury has made valid points, requests and recommendations, citing potential conflicts of interest. For this information, see *(Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report, 2022-2023, pg 23.)*

M Group has inserted itself in essentially every aspect of the city government. M Group planners **ARE** the planning department, 16 of them. Until the recent release of the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report, M Group individuals were not identified as M Group consultants on the Petaluma planning department website or in any email communication. The public, when dealing with the planning department, has had no way of knowing that the staff (as the city manager has referred to them) are members of the M Group. Also, according to the Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury, many citizens are frustrated by Petaluma's planning process and feel issues are not addressed.

"The City Council has final approval on all developmental projects. The City Manager, as liaison to the City Council, has weekly meetings with the Special Projects Manager, an M\_Group principal, who oversees M Group employees. The City Council and City Manager are responsible for citizens' concerns. However, it is M Group employees who prepare the staff reports that decisions are based on". *(Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury Report, pg. 23)* Conflict of interest? Maybe.

Of course, M Group is looking out for its own interests. The M group is primarily responsible for increasing revenue for its own consultancy. A company must charge rates to meet costs, and profit is the goal.

The Grand Civil Jury report reads **“Other cities have outsourced planning functions as a cost-saving measure. In those cities, however, the functions outsourced have been for specific projects or time limited projects. Petaluma is the only city in Sonoma County that has used M Group contract employees to staff an entire planning department for such a long time.”** (*Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury report, 2022-2023, pg. 22*)

The future of Petaluma needs to be in the people’s hands, not M Group. M Group needs to operate as a private consultant. M Group consultants should not be full time employees of the city of Petaluma.

An **independent analysis** is needed to review the many issues presented above, and might open discussion about restoring the Planning Department to full time employees, not independent contractors. After completion, it needs to be presented to the City Manager, City Council and Planning Commission, open to the public.

This recent Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury report erodes trust with members of the community. We, as citizens, have been asleep at the wheel and disrespected. Much is at stake here, as the city of Petaluma grows responsibly but maintains its soul and identity.

Remove M Group from Petaluma city government positions. **Return to accountability and transparency.**

Regards,

Karen Rold

Resident, property owner and taxpayer for over 36 years

Retired teacher, mother, grandmother

CONCERNED CITIZEN