

Opinion: Placer County supervisors believe in transparency

By Robert M. Weygandt

The public and media keep close tabs on how local governments spend taxpayer dollars these days.

Placer County welcomes the scrutiny, and is happy to provide answers.

I want to take this opportunity to update residents on the county budget for 2011-12. The Board of Supervisors believes strongly in a transparent budget process, and encourages all residents to stay informed about county government – whether they live in cities or unincorporated areas.

Many residents are unaware the county offers a broad range of services to all county residents. The county, for example, checks gasoline pumps, supermarket scales and price scanners to make sure they are accurate and inspects restaurants throughout the county to make sure food is safe.

The county helps veterans get the benefits they deserve, runs local elections, prosecutes suspected criminals, helps parents collect child support payments, issues marriage licenses, helps protect the public from communicable diseases and offers alcohol and drug abuse treatment programs.

It provides public health clinics, child welfare services, mental health assistance and many other safety-net services.

Placer County has worked hard the last few years to preserve core services and maintain its fiscal stability despite the economic slowdown and state budget crisis.

On June 7, the board adopted a balanced proposed 2011-12 budget so the county would have a spending plan in place when the new fiscal year began July 1. In September, the board will adopt a final budget with more precise estimates of available local and state funding.

The proposed budget is for \$720 million, down 4.9 percent from 2010-11. It is 16.8 percent lower than the \$865 million budget adopted in 2008-09, the last fiscal year before county revenue began dropping because of the economic slowdown and state budget crisis.

Revenue losses over the last few years have been accompanied by rising demand for many county services because of the economic slowdown and population growth.

Growth has slowed lately, but Placer County's population jumped 40.3 percent from 2000 to 2010.

The rapid growth of south Placer's cities has exacerbated Placer County's budget challenges. Up to 90 percent of the county's general-purpose revenue is spent on countywide services that benefit residents in both cities and unincorporated areas, but the county's costs for providing services in cities exceed the general-purpose revenue it receives from city residents by about 30 percent.

That imbalance is becoming more and more critical because about 60 percent of the county's general-purpose revenue comes from property taxes, and property-tax revenue is down considerably.

For 2011-12, property tax revenue is down 3 percent from the fiscal year that just ended. Since 2008, revenue from that source has dropped approximately 13 percent.

Placer County's budget outlook still could change dramatically based on implementation of the recently approved state budget. Specifically, the state is shifting significant new

responsibilities for public safety and health and human services to the county with insufficient resources to carry out such responsibilities. Similar challenges exist for the county's redevelopment agency, which faces funding reductions of approximately \$3.8 million due to the state budget.

I am proud of the county's success responding to the slowdown and state budget crisis, and pledge we will continue working hard to keep Placer County on a sound fiscal footing and preserve core services to the public.

Robert M. Weygandt is chairman of the Placer County Board of Supervisors.