

Opinion: Time to rethink how government works

By Ted Long

The 2007-08 El Dorado County Grand Jury in reported case No. 07-025 strongly recommended consolidation of the six West Slope fire districts. They found the districts were out of date with current growth and their ability to provide services. The grand jury concluded that the taxpayers of the county would gain better service and would save more than \$944,000 in addition to the county's contribution of \$1.3 million needed to keep the districts afloat.

Nothing happened. Why? The consolidation, while benefiting the county residents, would eliminate six fire chiefs and their use of their red car. The chiefs resisted the effort and like most things requiring real effort, time and apathy let the opportunity slip away.



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While the effort of that grand jury focused on service and efficiency, in this current time of serious financial shortfall should we bring to the forefront the whole issue of why we have government, what are our priorities and how can they best be served? We need to save money, cut waste and improve efficiency, but also we need to really look and see that we are truly serving the needs of society. After all, isn't that why we have government?

In its origin government was intended to provide those limited services that we could not do individually. Right up through Herbert Hoover's administration the emphasis was on individualism. The declared common interest of that time was limited mostly to defense nationally and locally, world commerce, and on the local scene, fire protection and the beginning of a public educational system. Over the years the role of government has grown, not only in the size of the original services intended, but in additional services, most notably beginning with Social Security and unemployment benefits of the Roosevelt administration.

Our world and our nation are in very different places today. Prior to World War I we had a standing army of about 25,000. Today we are the world's leading peacekeeper with troops all over the world. Perhaps it's a good time to relook at the entire system. Have many of our original purposes actually disappeared? As we have grown to a more prosperous nation, have our priorities changed? While we allowed people to go hungry in the past, is that tolerable today? I could go on with so many things, that I believe we need to examine our entire system – what is the role of government?

One conversation I hear very little about is the country of Denmark. On one hand it has the highest taxes in the world, yet a recent survey showed that the Danes are the happiest people in the world. How can that be? Well, the basic issues that keep us awake at night have been resolved in that system: health care, education, retirement are no longer issues. Yes, I am sure that they struggle with many things, but like the rest of us, many of those things are not life threatening, they are only issues of preferences.

Let's make lemonade out of this lemon, let's set aside our traditional often unquestioned positions and take an honest look at our priorities and where do we want to spend our money on? What laws do we really want to enforce and on what terms? What levels of government do we, can we, should we, eliminate

in favor of a healthier, happier society? I'll bet the first thing we would do is consolidate those outdated fire districts and seriously examine the millions spent to maintain a level of government at the city level. Did you realize, for example, that the City Council, five members, when you take the entire budget cost us over \$150,000 a year alone? South Lake Tahoe is protected by the city police, the sheriff, the highway patrol and the FBI, all for 20,000 residents. Could some of this money be used to support a local economy? Egos aside, this is not the Wild West any more.

Ted Long is a former South Lake Tahoe City Council member, planning commissioner and current foreman of the El Dorado County Grand Jury.