

# Opinion: Questioning EDC CAO's past actions

By Larry Weitzman

Only five months into his tenure it is apparent interim CAO Larry Combs has firmly taken control of the county because the Board of Supervisors has all but conceded power to Combs. It looks as if the county has a new dictator. But are there problems developing as a result?

Before hiring Combs, the county was saddled with another interim CAO and still HR director, Pam Knorr. It is Knorr who brought Combs to this county to wreck his havoc. As with most recently hired high level county officials such as ACAO Kim Kerr, Knorr, interim IT Director Kelly Webb, and former CAO Terri Daly, background checks and a proper recruitment procedures were not followed. That now includes Combs.



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Combs has already dictated to the feckless BOS a reduction in road maintenance. It has been one year and yet no plan to find a quality CAO has begun. And with Combs, the climate of fear has turned into a climate of horror. Important tasks haven't been accomplished which will negatively impact the taxpayers, such as long overdue impact fee studies, yet not a peep from the feckless BOS.

Combs' background is easily accessible on a Google search. In a reading of various newspaper articles it appears Combs had a major hiccup in 2004 for "retaliation" against the then auditor of Sutter County, Robert Stark, (retaliation was the word used by Stark) where Combs was the CAO for about the last 20 years. How did it happen?

Combs in 2004 presented to BOS of Sutter County a huge increase in pension benefits for county employees, including himself, by about 30 percent. Combs said it would cost Sutter County about \$11 million. Unfortunately, Sutter auditor Robert Stark spoke up at the same BOS meeting and said the real cost would be almost double at about \$21 million. Before Stark became the Sutter County auditor in about 1984 the CPA worked for the state Controller's Office as a pension analyst. You could say Stark was a pension expert. But that didn't matter to Combs and instead of going with the expert, the BOS went with what Combs wanted and the increased pension benefits went into effect. In 2004 Sutter County pension costs were about \$1 million. Now they total almost \$13 million. Unfunded liabilities grew from what Stark said it would be at \$21 million to more than \$120 million.

Guess who received the largest benefit from the pension change in Sutter County? It is a rhetorical question as the answer is Larry Combs. How much you ask? Combs pension went from about \$120,000 a year to \$188,000 a year, which he is currently collecting along with about a \$14,000 annual pension from a short two-year stint as CAO of Merced County and \$4,159 annual payment from the EDD. Those numbers are from 2014. And he probably still cries all the way to the bank with his EDC annual paycheck of about \$92,000 for his half time job. For 2015, that will be more than \$300,000 a year, not counting his medical benefits.

But it's what Combs did shortly after the Sutter BOS meeting on the pension issue that is disturbing. It was widely covered in the local Sutter County Press. Combs sought to have Stark

indicted for misappropriation of funds when he transferred among other small book entries, about \$366,000 to a water district, a transfer that Combs' office signed off on and were approved by the BOS. These books entries also required an emergency declaration, something the CAO's office failed to put before the BOS, which created a technical violation, which could have been cured with a later emergency declaration by the BOS. Stark said it was an accounting entry that was necessary to balance the books and no money ever left the county treasury. But that doesn't stop Combs from his retaliation. How did Combs get the indictment? Was it because he had a friend in long time (since 1982) county District Attorney Carl Adams, who appeared to be in his hip pocket to do his bidding? Combs had many other issues with Stark such as when Stark questioned paying Combs' travel expenses that were submitted after they were 4 years old. Isn't that a standard business practice?

Not only did Combs set the DA's budget, after 20 years Combs probably knew where the bodies were buried. He controlled the DA. After eight years of legal wrangling, going to the California Supreme Court twice, the case was thrown out. It was a specious case that cost the county of Sutter well over \$1 million of taxpayer money in a totally failed prosecution, a county with an annual general fund budget of less than a \$60 million (El Dorado County's general fund budget averaged about \$200 million over the last 10 years and currently sits at about \$225 million). Combs during this period spent another \$70,000 of taxpayer money having an outside CPA firm audit Stark's work, only to find nothing. Combs obviously doesn't care about taxpayers. The bogus misappropriation case cost Stark his health and over \$400,000 in legal fees. Combs walked away from Sutter County in 2009 with a current \$188,000 pension, plus COLA.

In the aftermath, Stark won two re-elections; finally retiring from his position as Sutter County auditor in 2014.

That leaves us with what happened to Comb's friend, DA Carl Adams. Adams, a married man, was forced to resign from office in 2013 as a result of a well-publicized sex scandal when he was forced to admit after initially denying (lying about) he had an affair with a woman who was charged as an accessory in a murder case in Sutter County. Coincidentally that charged was dropped. Was that the first time for Adams or was this a pattern of behavior? Maybe Combs knows? Adam's pension, also enhanced by the Combs engineered pension increase is an annual \$142,895.64.

*Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.*