

Opinion: EDC's future in the wrong hands

By Larry Weitzman

About or shortly after the time Larry Combs was dismissed from his two-year stint as CAO of Merced County he was asked by the Board of Supervisors of Sutter County to help them find a new CAO. It was a paid consultancy.

Combs recommended a man named Jim Arkens, who at the time was the CAO of Mono County, a county of about 3,000 square miles, but only 14,000 people, with only 6,000 of those residents living in the unincorporated areas. The only incorporated city, Mammoth Lakes, has a population of about 8,000.



Larry Weitzman

Arkens had only been CAO of Mono for about a year, accepting the position initially in Mono as its human resources director in 2011, eventually becoming chief administrative officer a year later. Sutter agreed to pay \$185,000 annually on a three-year contract, plus \$4,000 in moving expenses. His resume consisted of a 21-year career with Scott Paper as a fire and safety protection technician, working for the Northwest Regional Planning Commission (in Wisconsin), serving on the City Council for a claimed 24 years in Menominee, Mich. (pop. 8,458) and for the five years prior to his stint in Mono County, he was the human resources director of a small Taos, N.M., (pop. 5,716) hospital.

Obviously, being a Sutter CAO was a more significant government position, but that didn't stop Arkens from breaking some serious rules. In a county with an annual general fund budget of about \$60 million, Arkens, among other issues according to a June 2015 Grand Jury Report, sold the Sutter BOS on a \$10.5 million solar system that required the county to take on \$9.1 million in debt service at an interest rate of 3.7 percent. It was supposed to be able at peak hours under perfect conditions produce 1.468 megawatts of power, which was nothing special as most solar systems sell for about \$7 a watt as this one did.

Because of its cost, it will not return any monetary benefits until year 16 based on the seller's (optimistic) projections. That's a big system and a lot of debt for such a small county. And two years after the contract it is not yet completed, but the county is still paying for it. However, the big problem didn't occur until some months later, when the county conducted an outside audit by Gallina LLP that revealed that CAO Arkens (and the Sutter County supervisors) were violating government accounting principles and Government Code Section(s) 27008 and 27005. The question is how?

Arkens actually was found to have a "second set of books" and kept not only this \$10.5 million contract from the auditor/treasurer, but collected and spent funds regarding this contract in a separate account apart from the county general fund handled by the auditor/treasurer. GC Section 27008 requires that the auditor certify all claims against the county while 27005 sets forth the treasurer's role regarding disbursements.

Because of this second set of books it has been all but impossible for the proper allocation to the various departments of the receipts and disbursements. Some reports said Arkens had heard that the former auditor Robert Stark was tough to work with as was the California law. Nathan Black who was elected auditor 2014 after Stark retired after 30 years as

the auditor said he was "shocked" by the Gallina audit and not knowing anything about the \$10.5 million contract and the related debt.

A few months after the Gallina audit, the Sutter BOS advised Arkens with the proper 120-day notice (actually about five months in this case as the notice was given in early September 2015) that his three-year CAO contract was not going to be renewed. So what did Arkens do? He used up about 40 days of leave and stopped showing up at the county. He will be paid through this month.

How does this apply to El Dorado County? It was Combs who took a fee to find for Sutter County a new CAO three years ago and this was the best he could do? Guess who our BOS gave the job to lead the recruitment for our new CAO? That's right, the same Larry Combs. Last Monday was the NFL's "Black Friday" where almost every failed NFL coach was given his walking papers. Combs has a worse record, especially if his entire history is evaluated. Yet who does our BOS hire for the job? The biggest loser (no offense meant to the TV show where individuals work their butt off to be "the biggest loser").

You can bet that the chances of getting a qualified, non-dictatorial candidate that has the entire county's best interests in mind, one who follows law, regulation and procedure, one who appoints and hires not their friends, one who does not play the game of government musical chairs, one who demands hard work and works hard themselves, one who does not tolerate feather bedding, one who creates complete transparency and demands absolute honesty, one who will not use lawyers to facilitate cover-ups, one who reports clearly to the BOS with no favoritism among BOS members and one who will do proper background checks (something that hasn't happen for at least six years) will never happen as long as Combs is involved in any way with the selection process. If past experience is how we predict future performance, Combs is absolutely disqualified.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.