

Opinion: El Dorado County survey a joke

By Larry Weitzman

Money is so tight in El Dorado County that CAO Larry Combs recently decided that no general fund money will be used for roads in El Dorado County. But that didn't stop our Board of Supervisors from conducting a Citizens Engagement Survey at a reported cost of \$15,000 to "help" with determining a county strategic plan.

After several months of meetings, which included hundreds of hours of time of highly paid county officials, a 98-page detailed report of the survey results were released about three weeks ago. I happened to be on one of the committees, the Good Governance Committee, that tried to help work on the strategic plan's other aspects. At the several meetings including the initial meeting for good governance I made the point that only six words were necessary to define good governance, not the government speak that is so often seen which consists of flowery politically correct whatever. Those six words are: "Absolute Honesty, Pristine Ethics and Complete Transparency." As to strategic planning, I said probably 95 percent of the county populace wants three things: public safety, good roads and good land use planning. Those points were made directly to Laree Kiely, whose Kiely Group was hired to perform and administer this survey.



Larry Weitzman

The survey is replete with its own issues ranging from poorly designed questions to biased sampling. For such a survey, the sample of participants must be chosen randomly. During a university statistics course the one thing I remembered was for a survey to be valid it should be taken randomly and consist of a sampling of at least 1,256 participants. And that is where the problems begin.

El Dorado County has a population of 183,087. Survey takers totaled 2,228, with 2,119 living in EDC. Forty-nine are here part time and 53 claimed to be non-residents. That's about a 1 percent participation rate. Of that sample 62 percent of the respondents were female. Almost 70 percent were older than 50.

At least two emails from an EDC official were sent to all other EDC county employees encouraging them to participate with a direct link to the survey. The result was that 20 percent of the survey respondents said they worked for the government, giving them a biased self-interest. On top of that, 187 of the respondents said they were educators – more government. That means these people were over represented by 250 percent based on population and people in private industry were under represented by about 65 percent.

El Dorado Hills, with a population of 42,000, had a total of just 300 respondents, where Placerville with a population of 10,000 had 393 respondents, weighting the Placerville respondents' answers by more 500 percent over that of El Dorado Hills respondents. One of the other more important facts skewing the results is that you could take the survey more than once. I did. So did several other people.

Of the 98 pages, there were more than 50 pages of comments from respondents that also showed even more bias. A lot of the comments were from limited and no "growthers." Another conundrum was the desire for higher paying jobs, yet the growth industries wanted from a preponderance of the comments were recreation, ag, tourism, telecommuting and "responsible"

retail, or mostly low paying jobs.

Many respondents wanted a rural environment, some with no cars or at best electric cars, but this highlighted pull quote from page 15 perhaps sums up the dozens of similar comments: "Please work with the small county farmers in creating easier ways to have home based agricultural businesses such as raising chickens, selling eggs, organic animal raising, selling and consumption of those meats, as well as growing produce and selling that produce and products at small local markets." Can you say Walden Pond? More high paying jobs? All of the above demonstrates why the data from the survey is basically bogus. But there is a surprise.

While the most important question of ranking county functions in order of importance was poorly written – 12 choices were given, but you were not allowed to give any or all of them a zero, which skewed the results. The question should have had the 12 choices individually ranked from 0-10, so you could rank them if you wanted three 10s and nine zeros). Notwithstanding, the top three in order of importance were public safety, roads and land use. Perhaps they should have paid me for my advice. Unfortunately, most people look at free advice worth exactly that, nothing.

The respondents also commented extensively that government needs to be honest and transparent.

Comments also demonstrated that the county should be their mother and father and provide all kinds of free service, health care, cheap housing, lots of public transportation, more bicycles (great with all our hilly terrain), cheap, healthy (organic) food and other items, none of which even should be a county issue. One interesting incongruity was when asked: "What county services most impact the quality of your life?" The top answer was the library and by a large margin, yet it ranked eight out of 12 in importance of county services.

So what was the real purpose of the survey? It looks like an attempt to justify the expansion of government. It could also be an attempt to create a diversion from how bad a job the BOS and its administration are doing. The survey has little, if any, scientific value. But notwithstanding, the survey as “unbalanced” as the respondents were, validated that the No. 2 job of the county is take care of the roads to which the CAO, Larry Combs, (which the BOS approved) said that’s one item for which no general fund dollars will be used. What’s the purpose of the survey then, biased or not? But making matters worse is our expanding county government employees making more money than ever in salary and benefit. To hell with the roads.

News flash: Confirmed by Combs, he advised his staff a few days ago that he was going to hire his loyal friend for the position of assistant CAO. Shawne Corley, who is currently ACOA of Sutter County, is where Combs spent about 25 years. This is exactly what I said in my last column in the last paragraph, Combs will hire his friends and play the game of government musical chairs, the game where government employees never lose. Sounds just like Terry Daly hiring Kim Kerr and our continuing feckless BOS. How history doth repeat itself.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.