

Opinion: EDC wants spin doctor to tell its 'truth'

By Larry Weitzman

County government is not on sale like a gallon of milk at the local grocery, although many residents think if you have enough money, then maybe it is. In the past few years' things haven't been going well in El Dorado County government.

Our county has had many problems, especially in the hiring of some high level management people, the failure to do serious background checks, the public's distaste for the recent 15 percent raise, unnecessary additional hiring, and the failure of the county administration to do its job in a timely manner, such as the utter and complete failure to transfer property tax revenues during fire department annexations and its most blatant failure, the inability to timely file Mitigation Fee Act five-year Nexus studies thereby jeopardizing more than \$30 million of EDC money. A lawsuit is currently in progress regarding the MFA failures. These are only a few county failures.



Larry Weitzman

Larry Combs, the interim CAO, has a solution. He wants to hire a "spin doctor," otherwise known as a public information officer. A PIO becomes a buffer between the public inquiries and direct communications between county officials and the public, like a lawyer protecting his client from direct

communications, or a press secretary protecting a politician. Ex-CAO Terry Daly tried this once before about two years ago when she hired a public relations firm to protect her and the BOS when Daly had the BOS issue a public relations statement prepared by the PR firm. The 900-word press release tried to tell the public how great a job the CAO and BOS were doing in a series of half-truths. That was a complete waste of a \$25,000 contract. Daly soon become an embarrassment and was let go a few months later.

Now with the roads of our county failing apart, the BOS last month on a 3-2 vote stopped general fund road maintenance with Brian Veerkamp, Sue Novasel and Mike Ranalli voting no against a Shiva Frentzen motion to reinstate such general fund road funding (for a second time). The same gang of three supervisors also voted down (again for the second time) the policy of requiring of the CAO to prepare five-year budget projections.

But that gang of three (minus one) Supervisors (Veerkamp, Novasel and Ron Mikulaco) in a more recent vote on March 22 voted 3-2 to raise county fees (taxes) by about a million dollars annually (Frentzen and Ranalli voted no). However, after the vote, Mikulaco claims he voted "no" on the fees and the resolution and minutes have yet to be signed by the chairman of the BOS who happens to be Mikulaco. The clerk of the BOS says he watched the video over and over again and says it sure looks like it was a 3-2 vote for increasing the fees. I agree as I watched the video several times. There will be more to come on this.

While salaries and benefits have increased by a total of at least \$77 million in the last three years because of 15 percent salary raises, increasing benefits costs and new hiring, the excuse you will hear from EDC officials is that we haven't raised county fees in six years. But the real reason is the EDC BOS has created a situation of continuous deficits in that with longevity raises and the skyrocketing expense of

benefits, revenues will never catch up. It's in the mid-year budget report. CAO Combs says we have no general fund money for road maintenance, EDC's No. 2 priority.

Something has gotta' give and that's your wallets. But that's not all. Residents are complaining about road maintenance and one of the responses demonstrates why EDC needs a spokesperson after I excerpt the email of EDC's director of transportation in response to an inquiry on why our road maintenance is not getting done (think of the tax hike above). "Road maintenance is accomplished using road fund which is funded through gasoline taxes and while the cost of gasoline being low is good for the consumer, the amounting of funding for road maintenance within the county has fallen substantially."

Doesn't this high level guy know that state gasoline taxes are a fixed amount per gallon (about 41 cents)? Gasoline use is down slightly because of more economical cars, but gas prices have almost nothing to do with gasoline taxes, but it could have an effect on sales taxes, which are not gasoline taxes. The fed charges a flat 18.4 cents per gallon as well.

Then he goes on to say, "One alternative that you may consider is having your neighbors ban together and create a special assessment district to maintain the neighborhood's roadway infrastructure." In other words, he is telling the concerned taxpayer he can raise his own and his neighbors' taxes to do something the county is already obligated to do. While the director didn't know his subject very well (understandable as he was hired by another incompetent, Kim Kerr, with no significant background checks), a PIO would have never told the truth that you should raise your own taxes (because the county is using all its money to pay for me and the rest of the county employees. If you don't believe how well we are paid, just check it out on transparentcalifornia.com). This is the same department that messed up the purchase of two \$430K snowplows two years ago and now wants to raise the taxes of the residents in Lake Tahoe.

For the cost of a \$150,000 plus PIO, we could hire two road maintenance workers, put them in one of our many maintenance trucks, and send them out every day to fill potholes. But those guys wouldn't be able to cover up EDC incompetence, which is the purpose of a PIO.

We talk of accountability and transparency, which needs to be complete. A PIO is nothing more than a shield whose sole purpose is to hide the truth or spins it for public consumption and more important adds a layer of opaque glass between county officials and the public. The county is full of corruption and misdeeds and that's why they need a PIO, it's to protect themselves, not help county residents. If the county were doing a good job, which many of the rank and file employees try to do every day, they wouldn't need a spin doctor to tell us how things are wonderful and rosy. Next thing you know is that they will hire an ad agency. Our county needs a PIO like we need another Larry Combs, Terri Daly and Kim Kerr and/or the gang of three. And this list could go on.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.