

Opinion: EDC has good CAO candidate in-house

By Larry Weitzman

Who will be the next chief administrative officer for El Dorado County?

In another recent failure of the CAO's office, EDC's Economic Development Policy J-7 allowing the county to give tax incentives for businesses to locate in EDC lapsed during some potential negotiations to locate a small to medium business enterprise in El Dorado County. In February 2015, the policy was extended to Nov. 10, 2015.



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No one in the CAO's office calendared Policy J-7 for renewal, clearly the fault of CAO Larry Combs. He has made so many mistakes I am losing count; never mind his recommending no General Fund funding for road maintenance or his own potentially illegal employment contract that I discussed recently. His record as a CAO here and other places is below dismal, yet he continues ruining our county, never mind recommending raising taxes and reducing road maintenance. He even told the BOS more than once he doesn't even have a handle on the budget. This is also the fault of the board for not demanding intensive background checks for high ranking employees, including Combs, which they haven't done in six years, maybe eight.

There is a solution to hiring competent administrative people, especially in light of employing a new CAO. It's called rigorous and responsible background checks, something that hasn't been done in the last three CAOs appointments, HR director and other department heads. As long as Larry Combs is in charge, it is doubtful it will happen. Maybe it's laziness or incompetence, but with Combs in charge, he will not recommend the best applicant, but will recommend a friend of Combs who he already hired as ACAO, Shawne Corley, less than two months ago. Sounds like Combs is trying to cover (up) his own tracks as CAO, including his illegal employment contract.

Corley, the ACAO for Sutter County already had a chance to be an Interim CAO in Sutter County, a county one-third the size of El Dorado, a general fund budget one-quarter the size of EDC and a county population (about 20,000) that is one-seventh our size. Reports indicate that she failed in that job in a matter of months (see June 2015 Sutter County Grand Jury Report).

After Combs was let go as CAO by Merced County, in late 2012 the Sutter BOS hired Combs for about \$5,000 to recruit a new CAO for Sutter. I have written this story and the mess this new CAO, Jim Arkens, made for Sutter. It was so bad, the Sutter BOS advised Arkens they were not going to renew his three-year contract about two and a half years into it. While Arkens got paid for the next four or five months, he stopped showing up for work.

Arkens biggest failure was binding the county to a \$10 million contract with a \$9 million, 3.7 percent loan for a solar farm, illegally keeping an illegal separate bank account for it, kept it secret from the auditor (violations of the County Charter) until sometime after signing it and as of a couple of months ago and almost two years after signing, the project is not even finished. This is the guy who Combs recommended. Of course if the EDC BOS had done a background check, they would have known all this information. It was all over the media and

even in the Sutter County Grand Jury report for 2015.

And now our Board of Supervisors is trusting Combs to select our new CAO as he has been assigned to do by our BOS. That idea is not only outrageous, but an abdication of one of the most important duties of the BOS, to choose the best candidate. Combs is incompetent not only as a CAO, but in selecting a new CAO not only because of his hiring friends, but his failure to perform background checks. It is something never to be overlooked.

An April 1 letter to the BOS and signed by all seven elected department heads forcefully recommended that Don Ashton be EDC's next CAO. Ashton is the current head of the largest department in the county, Health and Human Services. He did receive a rigorous and comprehensive background check, not from HR, but from the county sheriff about six years ago who performed the same background check as hiring a new deputy. EDC sheriff's detectives did much of the legwork not only investigating everything on his resume, but interviewing prior employers, prior work associates, work history, and interviewing and checking on his education, neighbors, friends and other references.

Ashton was hired to be the sheriff's chief financial officer, where he put in place new money saving procedures and processes that saved the department tens of thousands of dollars. Ashton has a B.S. in environmental health and a master's in public administration (both from Cal State Northridge) and has worked in the public sector for most of his adult life. His last position before EDC was deputy executive officer of Administration and Finance for the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors, a county of 10 million people and over 4,000 square miles. He is not only eminently qualified, he went through the most thorough of background checks.

When the position of ACAO came open a few months ago, Ashton

applied. He didn't get the job as it was given to a friend of CAO Larry Combs, Shawne Corley who at one time served as ACAO to Combs in Sutter County. She hired in at a base salary of about \$162,000 (not counting benefits) annually. I doubt any background scrutiny was done by HR. Comb and/or Knorr recently also hired another Sutter County alumnus into the job of EDC risk manager at a salary of over \$120,000, plus benefits. The new risk manager being from Sutter might just be a coincidence.

I asked Supervisor Brian Veerkamp whether a background check was done on Combs by Pam Knorr, our current HR director, and he said yes. If anyone had done a simple Google search as I have, Combs questionable background would have been obvious. Combs is here because he was a friend of Knorr who begged the BOS privately to hire this guy. Any interview with past and current public officials from Sutter or Merced counties would have sunk Combs. And then there is the lack of a background check on HR Director Pam Knorr. Knorr was a good friend of Terri Daly who recommended Knorr to the BOS. No interviews were conducted with members of the Alpine County BOS or other public officials where she was CAO of an 800 square mile county with a total population of 1,150 where many of the county employees live in Nevada.

Combs has been here about 10 months and admits he doesn't know much about the county due to his two days a week schedule. Our seven electeds who wrote the recommendation letter praising Don Ashton's work history and qualifications have worked for the county longer than any BOS member, many for over two decades and have known Ashton for his entire EDC career (six years). ACAO Corley has been employed in EDC a month and a half. And Ashton, in less than four years working in EDC, was appointed department head of the county's largest agency. If anyone knows the quality and thoroughness of Ashton, it is Sheriff John D'Agostini, who was one of the seven electeds who signed the recommendation letter.

Ashton will take EDC forward in the tradition of government that is honest and completely transparent, back to the tradition of "government of the people, by the people and for the people." He will demand excellence and thereby get our fiscal house in order. Is the BOS afraid of that possibility? Failing to appoint Ashton would be the biggest failure of this board in the last six years. Failure of the BOS to do the right thing for our county would then warrant a serious recall effort.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.