

Fiscal oversight not top priority for EDC supes

By Kathryn Reed

It has been well documented that to get a job in El Dorado County it pays to know who is doing the hiring.

Last month the Board of Supervisors reviewed a list of contracts of \$64,000 or less signed by the chief administrative officer. According to board policy, these contracts are not approved by the supervisors, but instead they are reviewed by the board annually after the fact. The majority of the contracts were signed by former CAO Larry Combs.

Joe Harn, county-auditor controller, has been harping on transparency for years. Only now with Don Ashton at the helm of the county is there beginning to be some light shed on favors done by previous CAOs.

Nonetheless, the electeds seem to care very little about what has gone on under their watch. Supervisor Brian Veerkamp appeared disgusted with Harn bringing the issue up again in December.

“I’m really here to briefly vent about the Prentice, Long, and Epperson contract which really is a text book example of a total lack of transparency and frankly poor financial management. This contract is in the CAO’s budget but the contract administrator is county counsel. So, who’s ultimately responsible for the work and the contract? I don’t know. As far as I can tell, nobody,” Harn told the supervisors. “Also, related to Prentice, we are talking about Alpine County’s county counsel who the former CAO brought on board, which indicates, I suppose our former CAO concluded that there’s not a law firm in our county that could provide

these services, which I find hard to believe. What this is really about county officials hiring their out-of-county friends.”

Not only are friends being hired, but they come on board at top dollar.

When former CAO Pamela Knorr had the same position in Alpine County she filed a claim for damages against that county for failing to provide a safe work environment. Knorr’s claim states that her alleged grievances are supported by Ken Machold’s investigative report. Machold is now an employee of the Prentice law firm. David Prentice of the Prentice, Long, and Epperson is the part time county counsel for Alpine County and Prentice approved a \$168,000 settlement/severance agreement between Knorr and Alpine County.

Mike Ciccozzi, who heads El Dorado County’s legal department, is the contract administrator for the county’s current contract with the Prentice law firm.

Former EDC CAO Terri Daly, a former Amador County employee, brought in her friend Martha Shaver, the former Amador County counsel as a consultant. Daly signed a contract with Shaver to review and update EDC’s policies and ordinances. EDC paid Shaver \$50,000. No proposed update of the county’s policies and ordinances ever came forward. In fact, the Board of Supervisors has nothing to show for this \$50,000 expenditure.

Beyond being fiscally irresponsible, these types of hires and contracts are impacting morale at the county.

Harn told the supervisors that county employees find it demoralizing when CAOs hire their out of county friends at the highest step.

Board policy says all employees hired by the CAO at the highest step must be reported to the board and the public annually. On April 13, 2016, Harn wrote the BOS and then CAO

Combs saying the public reporting requirement was being ignored.

Combs, the former Sutter County CAO, hired two former Sutter County employees at step 5, the highest level. Those hires (the risk manager and assistant CAO) were never reported publicly as required by county policy. Both were friends of Combs'. Shawne Corley, the current assistant CAO, was hired at an initial salary of \$182,000 per year. Qualified longtime El Dorado County employees were never given a chance by the then CAO, according to Harn.

At the time, Harn told *Lake Tahoe News*, "The supervisors all say that they are for complete transparency, but the county doesn't comply with its own policies that require transparency."