

Opinion: Rafting companies need to pay to play

By Larry Weitzman

I want my readers to understand about county government functions. Services that provide a general benefit, like public safety (sheriff, DA, PD, probation) roads, infrastructure, zoning, business licensing and parks, to a lesser extent, provide a general benefit to all county residents and should be paid for by the general population and the general fund. I did mention licensing, but that should be self-funded, whereas fines and penalties aren't intended to fund public safety.



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As to building and safety, those are supposed to be self-funded just as the requirements we place on builders with respect to on- and off-site improvements for housing developments and charge huge traffic impact mitigation fees to provide for most of that. El Dorado County already has taxes on the tourist and recreation industry in the form of a 10 percent tax on hotels/motels and other temporary lodging called the transit occupancy tax. It raises millions of dollars and helps pay for the extra services required as a result and although it is general fund money, it's an excuse to fund things like the EDC visitors' bureau, festivals and other tourist and business draws. South Lake Tahoe makes bank

on its TOT.

El Dorado County is blessed with incredible beauty and topography making it a playground for the semi-adventurous and adrenalin junkies alike. We have one of the best recreational rivers in the country, the American. It is a magnificent show of nature, it's power and beauty. The South Fork of the American River (SOFAR) flows through the Marshall Gold Discovery Historic State Park like the financial aorta of EDC.

As a result, it has spawned a huge industry: commercial rafting. It's been ongoing for decades with some years drawing over a 100,000 people who want the thrill of running rapids like Troublemaker. It is a rush. And that's only one of several that will get your heart rate going. With the paddling required, it will add to your cardiovascular conditioning, too. For this year about 70,000 are expected to run the river with a commercial raft company. About the same number of people do the river in their own kayaks and rafts.

As a result of all this activity several problems are created. First is the public safety that has to be provided, emergency response teams, noise issues, crime issues, code enforcement, huge environmental issues and water quality concerns. Most of this falls on the EL Dorado Sheriff's Office. Just last week, they had their elite team of seven divers, all deputies, scouring the Cosumnes River looking for person a reportedly missing, spending hundreds of hours including overtime looking for this individual. On top of that, the taxpayers are spending about \$30,000 a year on a bus shuttle subsidy, purely to benefit the commercial rafting industry. An educated guess as to the total dollar amount spent on these river issues exceeds \$1 million. That could be a lot of road fixing money. Rafting is not a priority, but the roads are. But almost of this money comes from the general fund.

In looking at rate schedules from the various outfitters, the average cost for a river trip is over \$100 a person. One

outfitter listed cheapest run at \$95 for a half river run on a weekday. On the weekend that goes up by \$20 and any other trip goes up from there. Rafting the river is about the price of Disneyland, and Disneyland does it all: policing, environmental, cleanup, maintenance and shuttle buses.

What do the rafting outfitters pay the county to run their enterprises? There is a \$200 permit charge per company and a \$2 a head put into the River Trust, which is used to pay for one county employee (river recreation supervisor Noah Rucker-Triplett) who works administratively with the rafters (a complete accounting needs to be done on this potential slush fund). The outfitters take in in excess of \$7 million but pay nothing for the privilege of making this money. Taxpayers end up paying for the sheriff, environmental services, code enforcement or the continuing damages to the private citizens who live near the river who have to put with the noise pollution, commotion, huge late-night parties, vandalism, theft, trespass and more. In fact, the 6-mile stretch from about a half a mile east of Troublemaker rapids to where the river turns southwest from Highway 49 toward Folsom Lake at the Greenwood Circle day use area is designated a quiet zone. It probably is quiet compared to the take-off areas of LAX or SMF, or maybe not.

At a very recent River Management Advisory Committee meeting in the Marshall Gold Discovery Park Museum to discuss the updated County River Management Plan, the rafters want to tell the county how to run the river concessions. Isn't that the tail wagging the dog? There was no county representative present at a very one-sided meeting that bordered on mob rule. While an official county advisory committee, their actions may have been beyond the law and their authority. It's called an "ultra vires act."

The river outfitters want to play, but don't want to pay. If the outfitters want to have input, they can start by absorbing all the costs they create. There is a Planning Commission

meeting scheduled for Aug. 10 at 8:30 am at the hearing room in Building C in Placerville to discuss the update and possible approval of the River Management Plan (RMP). It shouldn't be approved. It should be modified to reflect the costs and how those costs are going to be paid because of the outfitters commercial enterprises. We need a study to determine what exactly these costs are and how and who is going to pay for them. As above, we have a TOT on lodging, why not on the rafters, too? They create bigger problems than the hotel/motels in EDC. We need a 10 percent river fee (tax) and a permit fee for private users. We should call it the rafters assessment tax.

The RMP is deficient until a cost study is done. Approval by the Planning Commission without a complete cost analysis would be derelict of their duty to the residents of EDC. Otherwise, the residents of EDC are going to pay, while the rafters play and make money at taxpayer expense. That is not a proper function of government. I doth protest and so should everyone else. Tell your supervisors enough is enough. While I wish the rafting industry continued success, the taxpayers should not be supporting and subsidizing these businesses. They need to pay their own way.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.