

Santiago: Experience to take EDC to next level

Publisher's note: Profiles for the four El Dorado County District 5 supervisorial candidates will be running on May 6 and May 7. The election is June 5.



Norma Santiago

Name: Norma Santiago

Age: 63

Occupation: Community consultant; Sierra State Parks Foundation, board member; El Dorado County Mental Health Commission, associate member

Education: B.S. Business Administration with emphasis in marketing and organizational behavior, UC Berkeley, graduated 1977

What elected, civic, nonprofit boards or groups are or have you been affiliated with and in what capacity?: I was elected on three occasions to represent Lake Tahoe residents as their District V supervisor on the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors. Within that capacity, I served on the:

- El Dorado County Water Agency

- Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
- Mental Health Commission
- El Dorado County Transportation Commission
- Tahoe Transportation District
- California Tahoe Conservancy
- Chamber of Commerce liaison
- Tahoe Paradise (Park) Resort Improvement District
- South Lake Tahoe Recreation Joint Powers Authority
- California State Association of Counties (CSAC), board of directors, El Dorado County representative

As a volunteer, I remain very active in the following:

- CA State Biomass Working Group
- South Fork of the American River (SOFAR) Collaborative
- Sierra State Parks Foundation, board member
- El Dorado County Mental Health Commission, associate member
- Hope Lutheran Church, Church Council, secretary
- South Lake Tahoe Democratic Club, vice president

Why do you want to be supervisor?: I thrive on being in service to the community.

I love being the kind of supervisor that listens and works with the community on deliver solutions that best serve them.

This is a nonpartisan position. How will you conduct your duties in a nonpartisan manner?: I seek community solutions based on community input. When called upon, I don't ask a

person's political affiliation, I ask how can I help solve the issue?

Why should people vote for you over one of the other candidates?: I am the candidate who best suits the next stages of Lake Tahoe's evolution in refining a vision and implementing ways to improve technology, advance economic clusters for education, tourism, recreation and environmental science; and, for taking steps in creating the kind of community that will thrive with diversified opportunities for families, the workforce, business, visitors, and assisting those in need within our community.

How are you going to resolve the CalPERS issue?: There is a multi-faceted approach to addressing the county's solvency with respect to its retiree benefits that affect current and future budgets. First, is to have a direct input on what investments CalPERS makes that generates the best return for the fund's solvency without compromising the state's values e.g. investments in high tech industries that deal with climate change adaptability, "green" technologies, etc. I believe that California should be an example of a prosperous new economy based upon its commitment to climate change adaptability.

Given this there are, in my mind, three ways to deal with the problem:

1) Remain active with organizations such as CSAC to work with the state on ongoing pension reform. CSAC's well respected Executive Committee provides input from its members directly to the governor.

2) California state government and labor organizations need to work together to find a resolution for pension reform. There needs to be a compromise in policy so that the fund can get to solvency and begin the process of decreasing these unfunded mandates.

3) The county must look at the future impact it is facing with unfunded mandates and evaluate its own investments to set aside monies to pay these future obligations.

Should the government be responsible for solving the affordable housing issue as well as homelessness? Why or why not to both? If yes, how would you solve those issues?: Yes, government should assist communities in addressing the homelessness condition and affordable housing. County government has been conspicuously absent from the solutions side of the table regarding homelessness, lending a compassionate ear to the kind souls assisting those in need, but doing little to actually turn the tide on a growing homeless population. El Dorado County has dedicated only mild participation for mental health, affordable housing, substance abuse counseling, and veterans services for crisis and chronic homelessness.

I applaud the people whose exhaustive efforts have been assisting those in crisis and I would bring a final report to the Board of Supervisors based on practical input and practice to guide staff, departmental services and dedicated funding for a proactive programming to turn this condition around. On the policy side, ongoing studies and discussions have created analysis paralysis. It is time we take action on the conversion of tourist accommodation units to help build workforce housing; incentivize long term rentals versus vacation home rentals, and work with our larger employers and nonprofits, such as land trusts and foundations, to develop housing programs for their employees.

To date the county has not been able to fix the traffic issue in Meyers with tourists clogging up residential streets. What is your solution?: This is an unforeseen negative impact on our community from mobile map applications that give travelers shortcut information to avoid Highway 50 congestion. The city and county have met to address this issue and have addressed some of the neighborhood congestion by creating road blocks at

Lake Tahoe Boulevard and Sawmill due to chain requirements; but while that works in winter, it is the travelers right to utilize public roads and this measure is only effective when chain conditions exist.

The California Highway Patrol is currently looking into the map application software to create electronic closure of roads, guiding travelers exiting the basin through the Agriculture Check (Bug) Station.

Arguably, this is a public safety issue and the agencies in charge of our visitors' and residents' safety are the El Dorado County Sheriff's Office, the California Highway Patrol, police and fire districts and departments.

I would work with all public safety agencies in addressing key map application providers and not give up until this issue is handled and travelers not congest neighborhoods but are directed to remain on U.S. highways when exiting the basin.

Likewise, the utilization of intelligent transportation systems that help motorist get real time information about traffic conditions could help minimize congestion while monitoring traffic flows.

And, finally, proven measures to improve traffic flow can be designed and put in place with the help of the highway patrol and Caltrans. El Dorado County's Transportation Department maintains a very professional and positive working relationship with Caltrans. Input from the community and county transportation staff will be an effective influence in working with Caltrans on traffic flow solutions.

What are your thoughts of making Lake Tahoe its own county?:

While I love the thought of autonomy based on the Tahoe basin knowing keenly its issues and solutions, I think affording its own identity as a county will require a great deal of analysis and public participation. Counties and cities are formed to initially address specific public safety, transportation,

roads, public services, goals and visions reflected and requested by their constituencies. Services are provided through a tax base that is budgeted by government. In so much as the overlaps between counties and cities are balanced, it will be the budget of an independent Tahoe county that would have difficulty delivering state mandated social services and minimum law enforcement (Sheriff's Department) from within its own tax base. Whether that tax base is large enough to cover these services has to be part of the analysis.

In the meantime, I see that communities at Lake Tahoe, Meyers to the West Shore, have consistently served as visionary examples impressing policy makers in Placerville. The strength of our community providing input to the Board of Supervisors has worked to implement positive changes throughout the entire county, but especially in the Tahoe basin.

When I was county supervisor, the board followed my lead in cleaning up the Angora Fire and processing the rebuilding of our burned community quickly and without undue costs to the fire victims.

The board also followed my lead on chamber of commerce grant requests, recreation improvements, bike trail expansion, water quality projects, forest treatment priorities, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency goals, road maintenance funding, public safety protections, and greater relationship building with the city of South Lake Tahoe and other regulatory agencies at the lake.

What entities would you not take money from?: It would be immediately convenient to say that I would not take campaign contributions from the National Rifle Association, as I would not.

I have never been confronted morally or ethically by a misguided contribution, so I haven't needed to contemplate this question. I have traditionally received contributions from supportive community members who know that I represent

all voices evenly without consideration of financial impact on my election.

What is the No. 1 issue facing District 5 and how do you propose to resolve it?: Housing.

District 5 has been facing a housing crisis for several years and it is time to make a commitment to solve this issue. There have been many studies and gatherings that have led to more studies and gatherings.

Policy changes need to be addressed to move toward building a sustainable, diverse inventory of housing for our residents: Revising ordinances for vacation home rentals, converting tourist accommodation units to create some workforce housing, and conformance to the 2008 California State Aeronautics Act zoning could seriously impact housing stock.

There is a direct relationship between housing and jobs. The opportunity for varying, well-paying jobs is not only contingent upon a strong and diversified economy, but also on a solid housing policy that creates a diversified housing inventory. We cannot have one without the other.

This issue can only be solved by strong leadership and political will. This will be one of my focused priorities and I fully intend to utilize all available resources by the combined agencies at the lake to finally provide improvements for affordable workforce housing.

Do you believe supervisors should meet in Tahoe more often? Why or why not?: Yes. Support by county supervisors is fundamentally based on an ongoing and frequent familiarity with the Lake Tahoe Basin issues.

When policymakers truly experience issues and efforts at Lake Tahoe, they will be invested in the solutions.

When I was the District V supervisor, I brought El Dorado

County board members to the lake often to either meet with me individually, attend meetings with the city, to participate in public forums, to tour facilities, for annual board meetings, and to meet with our business and regulatory agencies so that each board member could gain a greater understanding of issues before making decisions on them.

Also, because of Lake Tahoe's unique position at the federal and state level, there is an opportunity to influence policy county-wide that benefits the entire county. Some examples of this are in the areas of water, forest management, transportation, the digital infrastructure.

Would you support having more tax dollars from the county coming to the South Shore? Currently, more dollars leave the basin than come back.: I would argue that more county contributions come to the lake versus leave, though that figure can fluctuate according to road and facility maintenance needs, social services requirements, water quality control requirements and fluctuations in the economy that are recreation and tourist based.

El Dorado County provides many services at South Lake Tahoe and within the basin, including, animal services, library, recreation, road maintenance and snow removal, water quality, mosquito abatement, mental health, public health, law enforcement, court facilities, Juvenile Treatment Center, county jail, planning and building departments, recorder clerk, senior and low income services, Job Connections, environmental management, public defender, district attorney, and veterans' services.

And, while the Lake Tahoe Basin is a contributing economic engine for the entire county, it takes the entire county to contribute to a healthy Tahoe basin. And, vice versa.

In my nine years as the District V county supervisor, I took great effort in breaking down the barriers that leant to the

separation of effort for the health of the entire county. When fires in the American River Canyon close down a transportation artery, not only does Lake Tahoe suffer from the economically constricting result, but so does Placerville and Pollock Pines.

I strive to keep our county whole and healthy, creating policy that raises the entire tide so that all ships rise.

What is your vision for the 56-acres in South Lake Tahoe?: The South Lake Tahoe Recreation Area, 56-acre, is a gem for our community and contains one of the greatest recreational and cultural experience potentials at the lake.

After a planning charrette, a creative public process by which the community, planners and governments came together to propose the best possible opportunities for this site, the county and city worked together alongside the Tahoe Conservancy to build Lakeview Commons and bike trails.

The future holds incredible possibilities for performing arts, expanded recreation, and improvements to the El Dorado County South Lake Tahoe Branch Library.

However, before we realize this vision, the lease agreement between the city and county regarding this property is in great need of revision. Soon this lease is going to be up for renewal and several things contained in the current lease need clarification. Discussions must begin now to address the greater goal and specific responsibilities.

It is important that the county and city come to an agreement on this important public property. There will be great opportunities to fund exciting projects in the future with the potential passage of Proposition 68.

Do you support having vacation home rentals? Why or why not?: I fully support community input, and I respect those who have suffered from the lack of enforcement in their neighborhood

surrounded by abusive behaviors in vacation rentals. I believe not only the abuser occupying the house should be penalized, but the owner or manager of that house should be immediately awakened, cited, and put on notice. There should be swift action throughout the community that our County will not tolerate bad behavior within our neighborhoods.

I believe county enforcement of offenders has been hindered by confusion within the Treasurer Tax Collector's Office, tying the hands of our law enforcement with bureaucratic processes and procedures.

Residents should not be repeatedly victimized because the county cannot effectively and efficiently solve this problem. I am wholly disappointed that leadership on this issue was seriously late and lacking in action.

It is time that we come to an agreement over the definitions of vacation home rentals. While the state defines them as single-family homes subject only to county provisions of any single family home, the truth is that they are commercial enterprises that require conformation to higher standards due to their adverse impacts.

As a single-family home, VHRs are a permissible use in the neighborhoods, however, if they were designated as a commercial entity, they would be required to conform to same regulations similar to a commercial lodging property. How we get there could require a California Environmental Quality Act analysis that would provide input for zoning changes in residential neighborhoods related to restricting current uses.

Perhaps simpler would be new leadership and a strong political will that immediately makes necessary changes to relevant ordinances, and direction to county counsel to finitely present action the Board of Supervisors can currently take that will curtail abusive behaviors in our neighborhoods.

Lake Tahoe area Realtors and property management companies

have an important role to play in this issue. During my tenure as county supervisor, I found that VHRs that were managed by property management firms were less likely to create problems in the neighborhoods. Given this experience and direct discussions with some VHR owners, I would make it a requirement that VHRs be managed by a local property management firm.

After you were no longer a supervisor you sued the county for back pay. How can you justify this?: For the purpose of clarification, Supervisor [Ron] Briggs and I pursued litigation not because of more pay. We pursued it because of a disagreement on a legal interpretation of a compensatory benefit for the members of the Board of Supervisors that was written in the applicable ordinance. Supervisor Briggs, with the help of his own legal counsel, had done extensive research on the matter and brought it to me as well as other members of the board who would have been impacted. Given the extent of his argument, I chose to join him in the case.

As a county supervisor, you rely heavily on county counsel to provide you with the legal facts of a case in front of you. I have a great deal of respect for the county counsel and the many who serve in that capacity. Supervisor Briggs and I had limited avenues for ordinance clarification. From the court's decision, it forced the county to clarify and correct any misinterpretation of action and ordinance language. In the end, the important thing to remember is not who wins or loses, but that a positive outcome is achieved.

I strongly believe that any employee has the right to question policy especially if what is in an ordinance or any governing document is unclear. It is important that clarity be established by whatever manner is available. In our case, the option was to go to court.

I'm glad you asked the question because I want to make it clear to the people that just because you hold a certain

position does not take away your constitutional right to challenge a legislative policy.

Tell us something about yourself that people might not know:
I'm a proud mother of two amazing children.

I'm a very active member of the Hope Lutheran Church and service on its Church Council as the secretary. The core of my spiritual being is in the belief that we are here to help and love one another.

I love Star Trek!

I am a proud Puerto Rican American who loves her birthplace and wishes that all could see it and its wonderful, loving people. It is a U.S. territory worthy of being honored and respected as any other state in the U.S. Viva Puerto Rico!

I love movies. I will watch a good movie over and over again. It was not only a preoccupation, but I also co-hosted a radio and TV movie review program.

I collected Betty Boop and Barbies, that I'll finally part with if anyone is interested.

I fully relate to being poor, and being successful, to personally searching for affordable housing at Lake Tahoe, and to preferring a job that helps people.

I believe in this community and the vision it can create.

I listen, I hear, I respond, and I respect community input. I love the public input process.