

# Opinion: New threats to El Dorado County

By Larry Weitzman

Sinister forces are attempting to “take over” El Dorado County. County government is the county’s largest employer and county employees on average are some of the highest paid employees in the county with a total payroll of \$177 million and total employees of 2,151 for 2016, the last year reported by state auditors.

That employee number is inflated by new hires, retirees and part-timers making the average salary for total FTEs (full time employees of which there about 1,850) approaching \$96,000 annually. Our county government is the largest employer in the county and one of the best paying employers as well. Dozens of county employees earn over \$200,000 annually and hundreds earn over \$100,000 a year. With the power to hire and fire department heads and the CAO, being a member of the EDC Board of Supervisors is a very powerful job.



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At the June 26 Board of Supervisors meeting, items were considered to change EDC’s Charter to do several things, two of which are extremely important. The first being removing term limits for members of the Board of Supervisors and in the alternative, allowing a member of the Board of Supervisors three consecutive terms or 12 straight years of power.

Currently EDC has a term limit of two terms or eight years for political offices, similar to the president of the United States and for most of the political offices the state of California.

The other significant change to the El Dorado County Charter strikes right at the heart of the Charter (and its voters) and that is to make the current elected department heads appointed instead of elected by the citizens of the county. That would be a massive usurpation of power from the people to the Board of Supervisors. One of the main reasons for EDC becoming a charter county is for the election of certain department heads beyond general law counties which only allow for the election of the sheriff, district attorney and (tax) assessor. While there are only 14 of 58 counties in California have their own charter (ours was voted in by the people in 1994), about 75 percent of the state's population live in those 14 charter counties.

In El Dorado County, the charter provides that the tax collector/treasurer, the auditor/controller, the county recorder/clerk and the county surveyor are elected in addition to the sheriff, DA and the assessor. The purpose is to give the voters the power to hire and fire those elected department heads and to keep them independent from the Board of Supervisors. It is for the same reason we use independent auditors for public corporations. Auditors should never be owned by the folks they are auditing. The reasons are obvious and as to a public entity, EDC would certainly qualify as one, although some people in the county think our government is closed off to them.

As part of the board meeting the board will take up the issue of making these currently elected department heads appointed by the board. What a power grab that would be by the board from the voters in a two-prong attack, the first being to lengthen their terms to indefinite or at least 12 years and the second would be the power to appoint what are currently

independently voter elected department heads, department heads that currently give voters a certain balance of power.

In describing a "benefit" of the idea of appointed department heads was a quote from page 19 of the "Summary Report to the Board of Supervisors" as follows "appointed positions require a rigorous process of recruiting and vetting applicants to ensure that the best possible appointment is made, whereas elected officials only need meet minimum education and/or certification qualifications."

This should be correctly called the "spoils system" a term derived from what New York Sen. William Marcy said of Andrew Jackson's 1828 election when he said, "To the victor go the spoils." Marcy (actually said "to the victor belong the spoils") was referring to the benefits and fruits of winning an election or military battle. The spoils system was the appointment power, i.e. judges and the bureaucracy (department heads in EDC's case). Federal and state system appointments many times comes down to appointing of your friends and campaign donors, certainly people who agree with you. Rigorous vetting and qualifications? Yeah, sure.

Enlarging this spoils system for the appointment of our county auditor or treasurer (who makes the investment of county funds) would be a terrible decision. Those are positions that need to be picked by the ultimate arbiter, the citizens.

Both these potential charter changes would be disastrous and expensive for El Dorado County. The selection process would not be rigorous but would be part of an expanded spoils system. The auditor/controller is the county watchdog, the only individual that could be considered an independent "inspector general" of sorts. It is the one office that must always remain independent from the Board of Supervisors (and the bureaucracy) and never be beholden to the board.

Now for the latest news. As this column was written before the

Board voted on these proposals of disenfranchising the voters, the Board of Supervisors has voted 5-0 in an attempt to grow their power, to place both proposals on the ballot (which is the only way to amend the county Charter), asking voters to:

1. allow the members of the board to have three consecutive terms thereby reducing the effectiveness of terms limits and
2. Remove from the voter's ability to elect the offices of auditor/controller, tax collector/treasurer, surveyor and the reorder/clerk. It will be a definitely blow to our already limited democracy and cause a huge expansion of the bureaucracy and cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars in higher salaries. Supervisors Mike Ranalli and Sue Novasel, who are up for re-election this November, both voted to increase their power and fiefdoms with their vote for placing these matters on the ballot. Remember this dastardly deed on both of them when voting next November. As Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts and absolutely power corrupts absolutely." This quote now applies to every member of the EDC Board of Supervisors.

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