

Opinion: EDC budget needs dose of reality

By Larry Weitzman

A new El Dorado County budget was presented to the Board of Supervisors on June 13. While it was signed by Don Ashton, it is the budget of outgoing CAO Larry Combs, his final gift to the county. The bills for his one-year tenure are now coming due.

A simple analysis of the first few pages in the budget summary tells the tale and that tale is simply too many employees or overpaid employees. Understand that nearly 70 percent of all county expenditures are for salaries and benefits. Another huge expense is an annual expenditure of about \$10 million in contracting solely done by the CAO in contracts less than \$64,000.



Larry Weitzman

According to the 2015-16 budget summary on page "v" was a claimed reduction in full time equivalents of 28.35 to 1,833.89 FTEs. On top of that during the year the county eliminated 15-16 high paid FTEs is a buyout program that included \$50,000 golden handshakes or close to a \$1 million. The total spent on salaries and bennies will be \$158.2 million, which is an increase of more than \$13 million over the prior year. That is an unsustainable growth of 10 percent. Just four years ago and for a period four years prior, the

salaries and benefits of EDC consistently averaged \$118 million.

But in the 2016-17 budget FTEs start the year at 1,891.49 FTEs. The budget readily admits a growth of 76 FTEs, which does add up. But the budget also claims a reduction of 47 FTEs including about 25 new HHSAs FTEs that are not General Fund positions. But notwithstanding, the net increase is 29 FTEs. The big question is that total FTEs can't be reconciled. Somebody is hiding something.

The projected salary and benefit spending for 2016-17 is projected to be \$168.6 million or an increase of \$50 million from just four years ago. That amount is projected to grow at the rate of about \$8 million annually over the next four years. That growth in total dollars outstrips revenue growth by about \$10 million. And those numbers do not account for the chance of any employee raises. If that happens (the current contract is over today) it will make these numbers look like pocket change. The county is out of control.

In both the 2015-16 budget and the 2016-17 budget, Pam Knorr, the interim CAO of 15-16 and Larry Combs the past CAO, they used a slight of hand technique to make the employee count look better than it was by comparing the current year to a year in which the county had significantly more employees. In the 15-16 budget, Knorr compared her claimed 1,833 FTEs to 2006-07 when EDC had a total of 2,128 FTEs. That makes it look much better. Combs used the year 2007-08 when FTEs totaled 2,055. But what was left out was that in 2012-13 the county has just 1,703 FTEs, so in reality there has been huge employee growth over the last several years. Just an example of how liars use numbers to make their case.

On top of that, Pam Knorr promised a soft hiring freeze during the prior budget year. It was just a little fib, especially considering that her department, HR, grew by about 15 percent and still remains one of the lower performing departments in

the county.

Using a term I dislike to use, our budget continues to be structurally out of balance for the next several years. One of the basic requirements for EDC in obtaining a 40 year, USDA 2.875 percent loan to build the badly needed sheriff's facility which is stated in the loan app is a structurally balanced budget for five years out plus demonstrated funding to make the approximate \$2.2 million annual payment. That loan rate was good until June 30, 2016. Fired CAO Larry Combs wasn't aware of any of the requirements. So at a BOS meeting Combs asks the BOS to direct him to prepare the loan application. So what does Combs do? He hires an outside consultant to do the loan application. I guess the more than dozens of analysts, some with master's degrees, in the CAO's office were incapable. But Combs policy is never pass up a chance to hire your friends. Combs even hired a "part-time helper" to aid the consultant.

And it's the consultant who discovers the structurally balanced budget requirement to qualify for the loan. Combs never knew. And we paid Combs over \$100 an hour for his services. He doesn't even read and the budget just presented to the BOS was Combs' 2016-17 budget, not Don Ashton's. Ashton had nothing to do with this budget. If Combs would have read some of the basic requirements for the USDA loan, he would have known the truth before he got started and worked to revamp his budget.

I have been writing about Combs' incompetence for about a year. While he is gone now replaced with a real executive, the damage as you can see has been done. But this is just the tip of wreck. More will be discovered, starting with his hiring of the ACAO. There is a waste of about \$200K a year. And for Combs, all during his tenure here he collected \$150K in what should have been illegal CalPERS benefits, plus other pension money of about \$25K a year. Combs' penalty will be the continuation of a total pension of about \$215K a year. Shame

on government, including the BOS.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Opinion: Retiree health care could cost Calif. \$6.6B a year

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

California is spending more than \$2 billion a year on health care for retired state employees – up more than 80 percent in the last decade, according to Gov. Jerry Brown's latest budget.



Dan Walters

However, the state would have to spend over three times as much – \$6.6 billion a year – to fully cover current health care costs and whittle down its \$80.3 billion unfunded liability for future health care obligations, according to a new report from Pew Charitable Trusts.

California isn't alone in facing a big retiree health care tab. California's \$80.3 billion liability may be the nation's largest, but it's just 12.8 percent of the \$627 billion total

for all states. Until recently, however, it was one of just 18 states that have set aside nothing to cover those future obligations.

Read the whole story

Editorial: Conserve water like the drought is staying

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the June 23, 2016, Los Angeles Times.*

The water level in Lake Shasta, California's largest reservoir, had plunged to less than a third of normal by the end of last year. Then came the El Niño rainfall, which by April had tripled the volume of water in the lake. The story is similar in Trinity Lake, part of the same network of federal projects in the far northern portion of the state that regulate the flow of water to the Sacramento River on its journey south toward the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and San Francisco Bay.

In the northern Sierra, water levels were also perilously low in the state's second-largest reservoir, Lake Oroville on the Feather River. But snowmelt in that region has revived the lake and given some relief to the State Water Project, which also controls the water that eventually finds its way down the Sacramento River – and into the delta and the California Aqueduct, down the San Joaquin Valley, over the Tehachapi Mountains and into Southern California.

It's tempting to believe that the state has weathered some dry years and that the brimming Northern California reservoirs

will now allow us to return to wet-year habits and lifestyles, but those days are gone forever. If the drought emergency is over, it's only because drought is no longer an emergency, but a permanent reality.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Eastern Sierra needs fire regeneration

By Char Miller

Sometimes it's the small things that can best tell big stories.

Like the Marina Fire, which has burned a modest 654 acres to the north of Lee Vining, threatened but not burned any structures, and whose greatest disruption was periodically to shut down Highway 395. It hardly seems worth much attention.

Such minor fires in the Eastern Sierra have routinely received little note. Historian Robert Cermak has dubbed the region, home to the Inyo and Humboldt national forests, an "asbestos" terrain. It's so fireproof that Stephen Pyne, in "California: A Fire Survey" (2016), pays it no mind.

This disregard, along with the Marina Fire's diminutive size—and lack of headline-grabbing ferocity—is precisely why we should focus it and the lessons it conveys about the critical role fire can play in the Sierra.



The Marina Fire has blackened a swath of land bordering Highway 395. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Start with the reality that many of the Eastern Sierra habitats which the Marina fire slowly worked through—in the official language it was characterized by “smoldering of heavy down fuels”—are similar to the more iconic pine forests on the western slope: fire can fuel their regeneration.

This biological process is also one that humans have helped shape. Ethnobotanist M. Kat Anderson argues in “Tending the Wild” (2005) that California’s first people used fire so routinely and for so long that they created “a carefully tended ‘garden’ that was a result of thousands of years of selective harvesting, tilling, pruning, burning, sowing, weeding, and transplanting.” The vegetation growing on the steep slopes rising above Highway 395 as it curves between the Sierra and Mono Lake may not be quite as “natural” as we assume.

That reality is also why the Marina Fire’s charring force was

not destructive but custodial—a clearing away and a cleaning up. Aspen, one of the Eastern Sierra’s signature trees, thrives after fire chews through litter and competing species. The pinyon pine may have a fire-return interval of up to hundreds of years, but one way its younger trees can succeed the older is via fire. It can open the canopy, a flame-driven opportunity that makes the whole forest more vigorous.

Animals can be just as opportunistic. The speedy, post-fire resprouting of sagebrush, rabbit brush, and grass is manna to antelope, deer, sheep and other wildlife that range through the Eastern Sierra. Like domesticated livestock, they are drawn to these tasty greens, a biotic rejuvenation and nutritional boon.

These ecological benefits guided how firefighters have been managing the Marina Fire; which as of today is 95 percent contained. They have established control lines on its northern, southern, and eastern margins to protect communities, structures and Highway 395. Yet they have not suppressed it with fire-retardants because however insignificant the Marina Fire may seem, they know its import. They are stewarding it so that it can steward the land.

Char Miller is W.M. Keck professor of environmental analysis at Pomona College and author of “America’s Great National Forests, Wildernesses and Grasslands” (2016) and the forthcoming “Not So Golden State: Sustainability vs. the California Dream” (2016). This is an updated version of a commentary that first appeared in the Reno Gazette-Journal.

Opinion: Edge-of-Tahoe developments would increase gridlock

By Darcie Goodman Collins

Traffic congestion at Lake Tahoe and the associated pollution due to projects being developed just outside the Tahoe basin present a critical threat to Lake Tahoe clarity. Projects near the lake that are in the final stages of approval circumvent the standards that protect the Lake and will flood the area with pollution and gridlock.

Placer County records show that the large new projects at Martis Valley West, on a ridge overlooking Lake Tahoe, and Squaw Valley include units that will draw thousands of people to Tahoe but do not fall under the direct oversight of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

The projects, located near the edges of the Tahoe basin aimed at Tahoe visitors and second home buyers, will deeply impact the lake. The project developers are offering no solutions to what they admit will be huge traffic impacts at Tahoe.

Additional traffic seriously threatens Lake Tahoe's health by dramatically increasing air pollution that feeds algae. Recent science also found that the top cause of clarity loss in Lake Tahoe is fine sediment pollution, caused by cars crushing the road sands used to make winter driving safer.

Developer plans admit that their projects combined may add over 36,000 vehicle miles traveled per day in and around the Tahoe basin, comparable to 2,000 cars driving 18 miles each to get to lake destinations.

The League is concerned that nearby developments that

circumvent Tahoe standards will become a new tactic for those looking to make a profit but hesitant to provide environmental benefits to the lake as required by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Local government agencies and TRPA must insist on developers providing reasonable solutions – such as direct financial support for high quality public transportation – for the negative impacts to Tahoe posed by their projects.

Darcie Goodman Collins is executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe, also known by the slogan Keep Tahoe Blue. The League is Tahoe's oldest and largest nonprofit environmental advocacy organization.

Letter: Valhalla play is a must-see

To the community,

Summer in South Lake Tahoe is already known for its outdoor entertainment – great beaches, hiking trails, kayaking, mountain biking, and more. I don't often hear talk about South Lake Tahoe as a theatrical hub, but that really should change.

On June 30, I had the pleasure of attending the opening night of "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," part of this year's Valhalla Tahoe Art, Music, & Theatre Festival. I'll get straight to the point, it was phenomenal. The caliber of the production, from the acting to the set design, to the setting at the Valhalla Boathouse Theatre, was as impressive as the best productions I have attended in New York City and San Francisco.

“Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf” takes the audience through three acts of hilarity and deliciously uncomfortable dialogue. The cast, which includes Briana Biller, Ginger Nicolay-Davis, Troy Matthews, and Mark Williams, are grippingly convincing in each of their roles and work seamlessly together in this stream-of-consciousness style play set as the after party to a faculty gathering at an East Coast university.

During one intermission, after a laughter-filled, and then shocking act, one audience member commented to me that she has a habit of falling asleep in movies and even during high action television shows, but during this play could not even blink. I could not agree more. Except between laughing and gasping, I hardly took a breath during the entire show.

My sincerest congratulations go to the cast, the crew, and director Rae Matthews for this stunning & wickedly funny production. It is truly a must see in South Lake Tahoe this month for locals and visitors alike.

Go get your tickets!

Jamie Orr, South Lake Tahoe

Letter: Fourth of July parade – a bad idea

To the community,

OK – I don’t want to rain on anybody’s parade, but whose idea was it to have a parade on one the busiest days of the year?

This town starts to vibrate at 7am on July 4 and the “powers that be” decided it was a good idea to shut down Highway 50

from 9-10:30 in the morning. Really?

Did you ever stop and think about the ripple effect that it is going to have on the rest of the day. Did you think about how many people you're going to impede by having a parade on July 4? Did you stop and think that this might get in the way if emergency services are needed?

You have upset locals and you are going to upset visitors. I just can't wrap my brain around this idea. It makes no sense.

Just my 2 cents.

John Spinola, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: Mosquitoes helped America win independence

By John R. McNeill

The spread of Zika virus by *Aedes aegypti* is not the first time a mosquito-borne virus has broken loose in the Americas. Mosquitoes and viruses have shaped the history of the Western Hemisphere in surprising ways for centuries; the United States might not be an independent country without them.

After the arrival of *Aedes aegypti* from West Africa during the transatlantic slave trade, the mosquito colonized parts of the Americas and served as the primary carrier for yellow fever and dengue, viruses that are cousins of Zika.

Together these mosquitoes and their fevers decided the fate of empires. In 1697 the kingdom of Scotland attempted to establish a trading colony on the Caribbean shore of Panama.

Within two years, however, about 70 percent of the Scots were dead of "fever." In 1707, Scotland accepted union with England partly to pay debts incurred by the disaster.

By the end of the 18th century, mosquitoes were not just intervening in imperial schemes; they were helping the Americas win their liberty. Yellow fever and malaria ravaged European armies sent to prevent revolution in what is now Haiti and Venezuela, leading to the creation of independent countries.

Even the U.S. owes its independence in part to mosquitoes. In 1780, the southern colonies, which had widespread malaria, became a decisive theater in the American Revolution. British troops had almost no experience with malaria, and thus no resistance to it. American militiamen, and much of the Continental Army, had grown up in the South and faced malaria every summer. So in the summer of 1780, the British Army hosted its own malaria epidemic, which was particularly intense in the South Carolina Lowcountry. At times, half the British Army was too sick to move.

In 1781, the British commander in the South, Lord Cornwallis, decided to move his army north to avoid "the fatal sickness which so nearly ruined the army" the summer before. His superiors, however, ordered him to move to the tidewater. So in June, Cornwallis dug in at Yorktown.

In the warm months, mosquitoes (including a malaria vector species called *Anopheles quadrimaculatus*) started to bite and by late summer of 1781, malaria had taken hold of his army once again. Fifty-one percent of his men were too sick to conduct the counter-siege operations that Cornwallis knew were required. American and French forces penned the troops in until Cornwallis surrendered in October, which in effect decided the outcome of the American Revolution.

Mosquitoes only lost their political importance after medical

researchers realized that they were spreading the fevers. The first to publish the idea that *Aedes aegypti* could carry yellow fever was a Cuban doctor, Carlos Finlay. U.S. military doctors led by Walter Reed confirmed Finlay's hypothesis. Armed with this knowledge, when the U.S. Army occupied Cuba (after 1898) and Panama (after 1903) they made life miserable for *Aedes aegypti*—covering up water containers and putting a drop of kerosene into those without covers. Within a couple of years, mosquito control had banished yellow fever from Cuba and Panama's Canal Zone.

Over the next 70 years or so, mosquito control acquired ever more weapons. Insecticides, such as DDT—brought to bear in the 1940s—proved deadly to all mosquitoes (and other creatures).

But *Aedes aegypti* control proved too successful for its own good. Once the mosquito populations had fallen drastically, and the risk of yellow fever and dengue diminished, budgets were redirected away from mosquito control all over the Americas.

Had the Zika virus come to the Americas in the 1930s or 1950s its prospects would have been poor—*Aedes aegypti* was under control. But since the 1980s *Aedes aegypti* has made a dramatic comeback in the Americas. While the main reason is the lapse in mosquito control, the warming climate has extended the mosquito's range. Today, Zika's chances of spreading widely among human populations via *Aedes aegypti* are far greater. And it will have help from *Aedes albopictus*, another mosquito capable of transmitting the virus, which arrived from East Asia in the 1980s.

Confronting Zika requires mosquito control. Malaria may have helped Americans win the revolution in 1780-81, but their descendants cherish their liberty and say, in effect, "don't tread on me" in response to pesticide spraying or orders to cover water containers. Perhaps a vaccine will sideline Zika, but until then mosquitos again have a chance to make history.

John R. McNeill is professor of history at Georgetown University. His book "Mosquito Empires: Ecology and War in the Greater Caribbean 1620-1914", won the 2010 Albert J. Beveridge Award from the American Historical Association.

Opinion: Why Calif. keeps failing to grade its schools

By Joe Mathews

Our state's leaders keep asking communities to do more to make our local public schools better—even as they keep us in the dark about how those same schools are doing.

In the 2013-14 school year, the state suspended the Academic Performance Index, or API, the chief tool Californians had for seeing how their kids' schools stacked up among schools across the state. API wasn't a perfect measure, but it offered clear school rankings that could be understood by anyone in your neighborhood—from parents to real estate agents.



Joe Mathews

At the time the API was first suspended, our state's leaders said they would give us a more useful index of schools. Three years later, they haven't given us anything at all—except a

promise that a new index will be in place for the 2017-18 school year.

I try not to take this personally. The oldest of my three sons started kindergarten in our local elementary in 2014. By the end of 2017-18, he'll be heading into fourth grade—and his two younger brothers will be enrolled.

To be fair, state education officials had many reasons for creating a new system: the federal government was ditching its No Child Left Behind regime, and California schools were adopting the Common Core and a new local funding formula that gives parents and communities the bureaucratic burden of creating Local Control and Accountability Plans for their schools.

Given all these changes, didn't we need a new index aligned with this new education universe? Of course. So where the hell is it?

The state's answer: such transitions require lengthy consultation, and the State Board of Education is getting closer to putting a new system together. Good to hear. But no changes justify three years—and counting—of keeping Californians in the dark about their schools.

The state had better options. It could have kept the old index alive until it was ready to switch to a new one. Or, even better, the state could have used the previous years to experiment by compiling and releasing to the public a new draft index each year.

Which is why the darkest, most cynical view of this transition is almost certainly the right one. Is the real goal of state leaders less accountability for themselves and for California's public schools?

After all, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson used the API's suspension as justification for failing to publish a legally required list of the state's

1,000 lowest-achieving schools last year. State officials have eliminated half of the standardized tests students are taking; they also have suspended the High School Exit Exam through 2018.

And the California Teachers Association, the state's most powerful teachers' union, has been lobbying hard against producing a statewide index that could be used to rank – or punish schools. CTA wants districts to have their own local evaluation processes that are aligned with the Local Control and Accountability Plans – which have, unfortunately, proven to be monstrously long and confusing documents.

The union's "statewide ignorance is bliss" logic matches that of Gov. Jerry Brown, who recently told CALmatters that Californians shouldn't expect the state's work to close the achievement gap between black and Latino students and other students. "The gap has been pretty persistent," he said.

Such educational fatalism isn't just dispiriting—it's at odds with California's own record of educational progress. In 2013, more than 80 percent of schools scored above 700 on the API; only 31 percent had scored that high a decade earlier. The same decade saw declines in the dropout rate, more students taking challenging courses (especially math and science), and increases in the school performance of English-language learners and kids from low-income families.

To pressure state leaders, children's advocacy groups are pushing legislation outlining a coherent and comprehensive index that parents and communities can understand. But the teachers' union and some politicians are dismissing this legislation as premature—even though a new system is three years overdue.

State officials will object that this assessment is terribly unfair. But after three years, they've lost the benefit of the doubt. If state officials want to show they're serious about

building a useful accountability system, they should take on a make-up assignment: Produce an index of all California schools for each of the past two years—the academic year now ending, and for 2014-15. The state has testing and the other data to do it. And we parents sure could use the information, even belatedly.

But I bet they won't. They're too busy coming up with excuses for keeping Californians in the dark.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.

Opinion: What it means to be 'California's Bank'

By Joe Mathews

If California were a bank, what sort of bank would it be?

Banc of California has a new, intriguing answer. In just six years, "California's bank" has emerged as one of America's fastest-growing banks—from \$700 million in assets in 2010 to nearly \$10 billion today. Since the end of 2014, it's been the best performing bank stock in the country, while pursuing a banking strategy even Bernie Sanders might love: serving the state's diverse array of small and mid-sized businesses.



Joe Mathews

More than 100 banks have branches in California, and many of them are community banks that seek to serve the same people as Banc of California. But the intensity of Banc of California's focus on defining itself by its Californianness is unmatched—and noteworthy for any enterprise, especially a bank in a globalized era when consolidation across borders is all the rage in the financial industry.

Banc of California has billed itself as “California Strong” and “the bank for those seeking, supporting and living the California dream.” It has touted California icons among its customers (Wolfgang Puck to Vin Scully), and built partnerships with USC, San Diego State, Pepperdine, and the L.A. Unified School District “Partnership” schools associated with former Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, an advisor to the bank.

In so doing, Banc of California is betting that a grounded-in-the-Golden-State enterprise can prosper in this new and different California era, when, for the first time, the majority of Californians are born and raised in California.

“What's good for California is good for the Banc of California,” the bank's chairman and CEO Steven Sugarman told me recently at the bank's headquarters in Irvine. Sugarman, 41, is himself a homegrown Californian—from Fullerton, where his mother serves on the school board.

Banc of California is making an argument that California's economy is so varied and peculiar that it needs banks with

deep local knowledge to serve it effectively. While bigger corporations dominate many American urban economies, California's business base is "very democratic," in Sugarman's words, with properties owned by individuals and families. Since so many Californians work for themselves, even very credit-worthy people don't qualify for traditional mortgages.

Sugarman says the bank's data also suggests that California businesses—particularly those owned by Latinos and women—are far more credit-worthy than many lenders have recognized. To better reach those customers, Banc of California in 2014 acquired Banco Popular's 20 Southern California branches (including \$1.1 billion in deposits).

In this context, California is not just a state but a business model; to attract diverse businesses, Banc of California needs to show commitment to communities. This is one reason why the bank has prioritized its Community Reinvestment Act lending—to community development projects like affordable housing—and trumpets its "outstanding" rating in such lending at every opportunity.

Such a strategy has its critics; many banks consider CRA lending an unprofitable chore. And in a conservative commercial banking world that holds that "anything that grows fast is a weed," Banc of California's rapid success can be seen as suspicious, perhaps predicated on ill-advised pricing or risky lending.

Sugarman says the bank invests heavily in risk management and in hiring people who really understand the state's markets. The rapid growth is in part a function of launching a bank in the wake of a massive recession that left an enormous void in lending and liquidity as California-based banks failed and consolidated.

Sugarman makes a strong case for a sort of California patriotism in matters of banking. After all, when Californians

bank with national or multinational banks, their deposits are loaned or invested outside California. Banc of California is busy pointing this out to governments and nonprofits across the state that are still banking with multinational banks less focused on our own communities. The bank also wants to continue expanding in Northern and Central California, and to partner with California-based online lenders and technological innovators.

Will this California model endure? A bank tied to a state as volatile as California can expect a bumpy ride in the long term. But the Banc of California is, for now, making a compelling case that it pays to bank on California.

I dropped by its Pasadena branch recently, to find out about a bank program that allows children to open no-fee savings accounts (that pay a relatively generous 3 percent interest for accounts below \$10,000). Within 30 seconds of my walking through the door, I'd been offered coffee, a freshly baked cookie, and a comfortable chair. As well as a comforting question from the young banker assisting me: "Where are you from in California?"

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zocalo Public Square.