

Budgets: It is time to be honest

"Unless and until public policy makers at all levels of government muster the political will to put the protection of life and property ahead of competing political agendas, these tragedies are certain to repeat."

Senator William Campbell (Ret.) Chairman
Governor's Blue Ribbon Fire Commission (2004)

Former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger charged Senator William Campbell to lead the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission following the disastrous Southern California fires of October 2003. Although a good deal has improved within the world of public-safety, the attitudes of many of our political leaders have not. With some obvious exceptions, the best I can tell, it is still business as usual.

I recently received a letter from a CalFire Battalion Chief who retired after 30 years of distinguished service. He wrote in response to one of my recent articles that "the priority of local government is the same as state government, which is the same as national government, which is 'getting elected.' Everything is secondary to that; everything."

One could argue that this statement offers a jaundiced view or an oversimplification of a complex political environment that elected officials find themselves in today. However, I think the actions and inactions of our elected leaders speak volumes as to what is truly important to them.

Today's elected elite have trapped themselves in a box, and they can no longer talk their way out. On one side are the organizations and corporations that pay the expenses to get elected. On another is the public who vote. On top is the weight of the organizations and departments they are charged with administering and on the bottom is the practical reality of the laws of nature, economics and physics. The lack of honor and honesty has helped build the trap they find themselves in, and fewer and fewer people are obliged to help them out.

Recently, I have taken to looking over local public-safety budgets. Some read as non-fiction, others are fiction and yet others border on pure fantasy. It is obvious that some agencies and departments have not figured out yet that the money tree has died. The endless revenue stream is over. Amazingly, one department has a 91 percent compensation, overtime, benefits, retirement, extra help and administrative costs overhead.

My business partner is fond of saying that no one really reads a budget, they just look at it. Line items are frequently nothing more than educated best guesses or embellishments of last year's numbers and everyone knows it. However, people do check the math. If this is true, many of these budgets will fly through the approval process with little if any scrutiny as to what is truly being budgeted.

I am amazed how many people do not realize that budgets frequently do not reflect reality. It seems like a simple concept, but a budget does not mean a thing if there is no money to back it up.

One can learn a good deal about an agency's administration, priorities and direction from reading their budget. Compare what is said by what is funded to learn where the real priorities are. For someone

to say he/she supports something that is not funded within the budget is dishonest to everyone.

Why is this tolerated? I submit that few people read anymore. Pie charts, graphs, bar charts and a collage of number charts appear to give a picture that is complete. Frequently, these pictorials are nothing more than an illusion to the story within the columns of real and projected numbers. Perhaps we should ask more questions to find out the truth. After all, we are paying for it.


To be fair, the budget process has to be a nightmare for those who must engage it. Mandates, contracts and other forces create expenses that all too frequently no one individual has any control over.

Not everyone is ignoring the obvious. Many municipalities and special districts are exploring bankruptcy and consolidations forcing new employee contracts. Others are successfully negotiating new contracts to help reduce their compensation burdens. More aggressive tactics include demotions, changing classifications and layoffs. Some

public-safety employees are being reclassified to civilian positions saving millions.

Privatization is a growing solution for many agencies. Don't be surprised if you see more contractors fulfilling formally public jobs. The City of San Carlos recently entertained privatizing their fire department. While the city council adopted a consolidation plan instead, the proposal did not go unnoticed by many other jurisdictions.

I was told once by a CalFire Division Chief that "the problem with the California fire service is people are overpaid and no one gets fired." I know as a former public employee myself that with few exceptions this is true and certainly not limited to fire departments. Needless to say, given the reality of today's economy, this "business as usual" is changing dramatically.

When a dentist tells you "you may feel this" you know he is telling you the truth. Why do so many agencies seem to fail to take note of the obvious? This returns us to our elected potentates. They created many of these costly contracts, mandates, rules and regulations; they also have the power to make them go away. It is time to be honest and address the reality of the world we all live in. Are you ready? 

It is obvious that some agencies and departments have not figured out yet that the money tree has died.

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