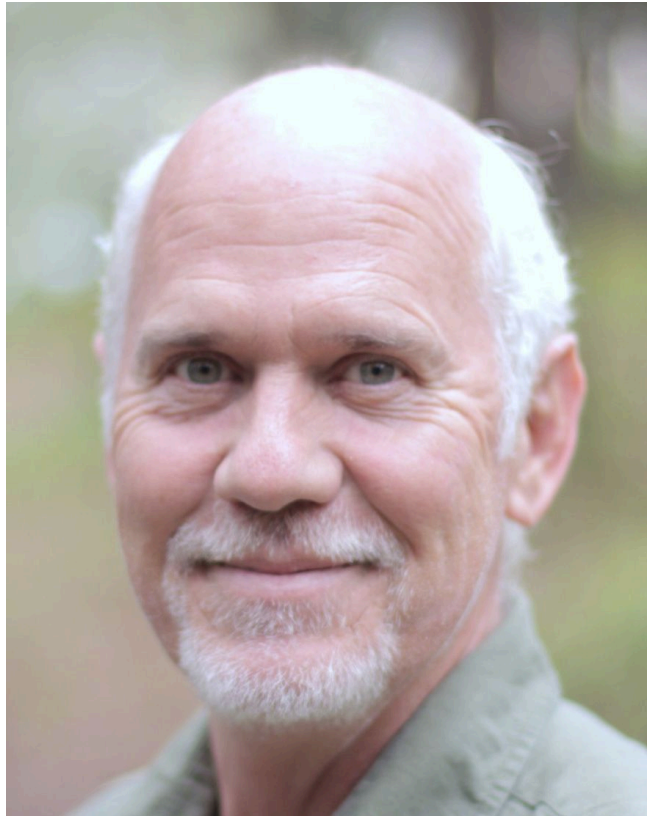

View from the Left: Tri-Agency 2.0 – Reboot Economic Development

November 6, 2022



The reason that we should care about elections is that we are selecting the leaders who will guide our success or failure as a community. As a citizen, the least you can do is vote, but after the election is when the hard work begins. Whether your favorite candidate wins or loses, productively participating in government decisions is essential to good governance.

Watching our local elected officials in their day-to-day management of our government operations and services motivates me to stay involved. When it seems appropriate, I weigh in with comments or suggestions. Sometimes I feel like I have been heard.

Last summer I wrote two columns about the Tri-Agency Economic Development Authority (Tri-Agency). At the time the Tri-Agency was trying to get a commitment from its member agencies, the City, County and Harbor, to pay a share of a \$290,000 defaulted USDA loan. This deficit was caused by a few high-risk businesses that defaulted on their loans. No new work could begin until this debt was paid.

In June, the Tri-Agency was proposing a plan to pay off the federal loan over a five-year period. I strongly recommended that this loan be paid off as soon as possible. Stretching out payments, would keep the Tri-Agency in fiscal limbo. There are huge amounts of State and Federal funding available now for infrastructure and economic development. If we wait five years, it may be too late.

On October 25, the Tri-Agency convened a joint meeting of the Crescent City Council, the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors and the Crescent City Harbor Commission to come to a final agreement on how to allocate this debt.

All these elected officials came with good intentions to meet our collective obligation, retire this debt and set the Tri-Agency on a stable financial footing to again focus on economic development.

In the end, the Tri-Agency agreed to reduce the \$290,000 unfunded balance by contributing \$130,000 cash in hand, leaving \$160,000 to split three ways. After some haggling, the City and County agreed to each pay \$60,000 and the Harbor agreed to pay \$40,000. Most importantly, they all agreed to pay this in a lump sum as soon as possible.

This cooperative action gives the Tri-Agency a financial clean slate. This is the first step in reenergizing a regional economic development effort at a time while grant funds are still flowing.

The Tri-Agency was formed in 1975 “to provide a united, coordinated, orderly, positive and more effective means for implementing and carrying into execution an Economic Development Action Plan and Strategy for the general benefit of all the people of Del Norte County.”

The current County-approved Comprehensive Economic Development Strategic Plan provides numerous projects that Tri-Agency could start to focus on. There is also a need to reform the current agency and amend the current joint powers agreement to further clarify its mission.

I hope that the discussion of these reforms moves expeditiously so that the Tri-Agency can be credibly positioned to tap into the infrastructure and economic development funds that are currently available.

The Crescent City Harbor District demonstrated recently what is possible if you are willing to compete for funding. The Harbor was recently awarded a grant for more than \$7.3 million from the US Maritime Administration Port Infrastructure Development Program.

This grant will fund the construction of a new seawall, the repair and renovation of a seafood packing and truck loading area, the replacement of cargo handling equipment, and the installation of EV infrastructure to power the cold storage trailers used to move seafood products to market.

This grant did not just fall out of the sky. It took a concerted effort for the Harbor District to get this grant award. Early this year, the Harbor Commission made the wise decision to hire a grant writer. When Commissioner Stone informed me of this objective, I introduced him to my friend and former business associate Mike Bahr, who is an experienced and successful grant writer.

I knew that if there were infrastructure funds available for the Harbor, Mike would find it. After the Harbor District hired Mike, he went to work applying for grants. Understand that this is much more involved than writing a letter asking for the money. These types of grants are complicated and technical. It takes specialized expertise to prepare competitive and successful grant applications.

After the grant application was properly vetted by the funding agency, Congressman Huffman stepped up to push this federal grant over the finish line. Thanks to this team effort these funds will be available early next year to begin construction.

The reality is that without this grant, there is no way that the Harbor District could complete the repairs that are needed to keep the fishing fleet operating. It would be impractical to pass all these costs to the fishermen.

Tri-Agency should follow the example of the Harbor District and move aggressively to identify projects and apply for grants to support economic development projects in our community. Tri-Agency 2.0 has a second chance to reboot economic development in our community. I hope they succeed.

Kevin Hendrick is the Chair of the Del Norte County Democratic Central Committee - dndems@gmail.com