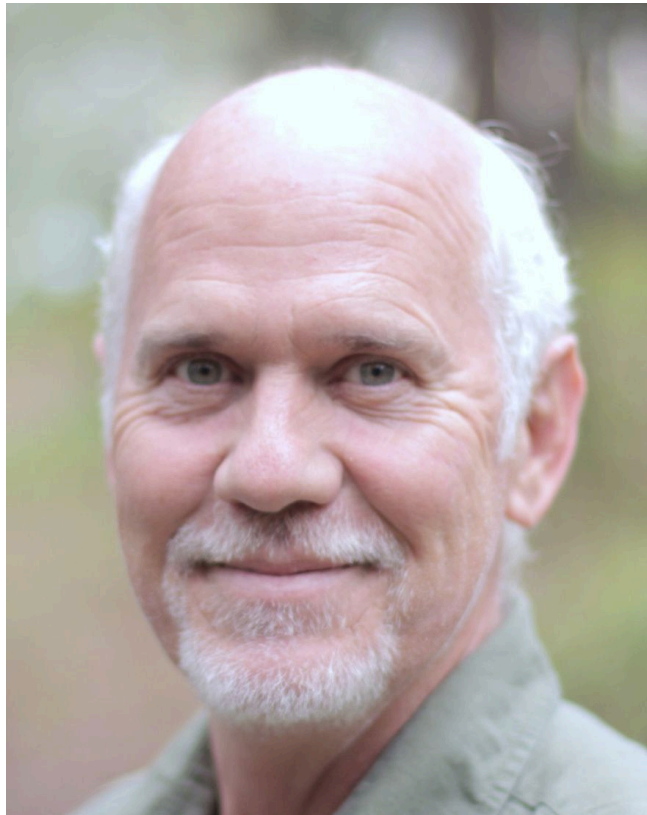


It's OK to challenge the status quo

October 2, 2022



It's refreshing to watch our newest County Supervisors challenge the status quo. This is what happened at the September 13 Board of Supervisors meeting.

This meeting started the usual 14-day process for the public to review the proposed \$181 million County budget with final adoption scheduled for September 27. This process provided limited opportunities for the public to comment. Supervisors Masten and Starkey suggested that the County should hold budget workshops to enable the public to better understand the budget and to provide feedback.

This suggestion was met with resistance from other Supervisors who thought that the current process was good enough. They suggested that these upstart Supervisors could talk to staff if they wanted to get budget questions answered. It was implied that they were trying to micromanage the specific details of the budget.

It's hard to tell if these two Supervisors were disrespected because they are new or because they are women. I suspect a little of both.

The point that was missed by the old guard is that the public does not have ready access to ask questions of staff or have any chance for meaningful input to the budget process. The reason for a public workshop is to create more accessibility and transparency so people can better understand the budget. Supervisor Masten pointed out that other cities and counties have multiple days of budget hearings.

As reported by the Wild Rivers Outpost (9/13/22), Supervisor Masten responded, “The other counties are much larger and have much larger budgets than we have and they provide transparency and openness to residents to be able to have that opportunity...That is not micromanaging, that is being fiscally responsible as a supervisor that oversees this government.”

Supervisors have the ultimate responsibility to set priorities and I applaud Masten’s and Starkey’s efforts to better understand the budget they are being asked to approve. All programs and services flow from the priorities set in the budget.

The budget report is 487 pages long. I doubt that any of the Supervisors fully comprehend all the details of the document that they are asked to approve. At least Supervisors Masten and Starkey are making the effort to learn. True to form Supervisor Masten is pushing hard to open access for the public to participate.

In the end the Supervisors agreed to schedule budget workshops. These were well attended by the public but only Supervisors Masten and Starkey were present. Initially these workshops were referred to by some staff as the witch trials, because they were fearful of the increased scrutiny. But the public comments were respectful, and workshops turned out to be productive.

I am not suggesting that there is anything illegal about the budget process that the county has followed in the past. They are following a minimally sufficient process to meet the legal requirements for public participation. “This is how we have always done it,” is not a good argument unless everything is running perfectly. It is not.

There is never enough money to cover all the needs, but with the current process even the Supervisors are not aware of all the requests that departments make that go unfunded. Supervisors cannot promise that every request is filled, but awareness of the budget shortfalls is the first step to addressing them.

State law requires that counties must adopt a balanced budget. I have great respect for the County administrators and department heads that each year pull together a budget which provides the best services possible with limited resources.

On September 27, the final budget was adopted. The total is \$182 million, but only \$39 million of this is discretionary general fund. This limits the budget choices that can be made

If the County will make extra efforts to involve the public early through budget workshops, residents would have a clearer understanding of the limitations that the County struggles with. Priorities must be set, and hard choices need to be made. It always takes more time to make decisions with the public involved, but an open process with facilitated public participation more often results in better policy decisions.

Six months ago, some people argued against the Governor appointing a replacement for the 5th District Supervisor. I pointed out that if we wait until after the November election that the 5th District would not have anyone representing their interest when the budget was adopted. After watching Supervisor Masten fully engage in this budget process I am grateful that she was there.

Supervisor Masten has been consistent in her efforts to listen to her constituents so that she can better represent them. I have seen how hard she works at this job, and I am wholeheartedly in favor of her keeping it for another two years.

Voters have a choice to elect Susan Masten who brings a fresh perspective and a willingness to challenge the status quo or her opponent who will bring you more of the same.

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