

Eye on Del Norte: The Consent Agenda: Whose consent?

December 13, 2022



The Consent Agenda on any governance in the Golden State remains a safe hiding place for elected to conceal items it does not want the public to know about. Not always but often enough, very debatable and controversial items are inserted into the murky world of the Consent Agenda for an automatic vote passage. The City, School Board, Harbor and all of the Special Districts have very limited consent item agenda; that's not been the case for the Board of Supervisors.

Whose consent is consulted? Certainly not the public's.

On the Board of Supervisors, the Consent Agenda may include in excess of 30 items. Most of these items are routine: approval of last meeting's minutes, Proclamations honoring individuals or events, again routine type items.

The Board of Supervisors and all governance in Del Norte conducts its meetings following Rosenberg's Rules, a shortened version of Robert's Rules of Order. The Consent Agenda is permitted under Rosenberg's

Rules. Permitted but not to be misused.

Here are two egregious affronts perpetrated during Consent: During the Del Norte County Board of Supervisors Consent agenda some years back, during the craze of sending our elected to Japan, the Board attempted to sneak through a several thousand dollar allocation to send Board member Lori Cowan to Rikuzentakta at public expense, as part of recognition ceremonies of the recovered Japanese vessel which washed ashore in Crescent City. I pulled the item for discussion and registered my objection to what I felt was a frivolous expenditure. When the moment came to make the motion and second to send Cowan to Japan, all one heard was the silence of crickets. Four Supervisors: Gerry Hemmingsen; Chris Howard; Bob Berkowitz and Cowan were poised to approve this self-serving action on Consent but nary a one of them would stand alone to approve this allocation. The hot spotlight was shining brightly on those four. No motion, no second, no vote, no junket for the Supervisor. The item failed, yet all were content to approve the expenditure with anonymity via Consent. Very disturbing.

A short time back, Department of Health and Human Services Director Heather Snow attempted to abrogate a 10-year lease with eight years remaining involving the physical moving of Alcohol and Other Drugs from Second Street. The cost to break the lease was a quarter million dollars. The item appeared on Consent. With Supervisor Berkowitz support, I pulled the item off for discussion and expressed my opposition to this costly decision.

Hemmingsen prudently recused himself from the vote which deadlocked the Board 2-2. Approval to cancel the lease was unsuccessful. Several months later, settlement to the owner of the building was agreed upon at a substantially lesser cost of \$80,000. These two examples of Consent abuse are not standalone.

Fast forward to current. The most recent Agenda showed 17 items on the Consent Agenda. A single vote approved all items for additional State funding benefitting Health and Human Services. For the last 23 months, the current Board has never rejected any pass through funds to Heath and Human Services. 100 percent approval of pass-through funding. I find it more than curious the County automatically rubber stamps approval of these funds to a Department which already controls about 45 percent of the County budget.

With the addition of Supervisor-elect Joey Borges and newly-sworn in Dean Wilson, hopefully, the public will observe the process of pulling off and opposing some of these questionable expenditures, in effort to redefine Del Norte County.

The Consent Agenda needs to be reviewed and appropriate changes be made for open, honest debate, and revealing to the voters where our elected stand on oft-times controversial spending measures from Sacramento and Washington, DC. One size does not fit all. The Board of Supervisors has options and the public must be respected with exercising these options.

Roger Gitlin is a retired two- term Del Norte Supervisor. He resides in Crescent City.