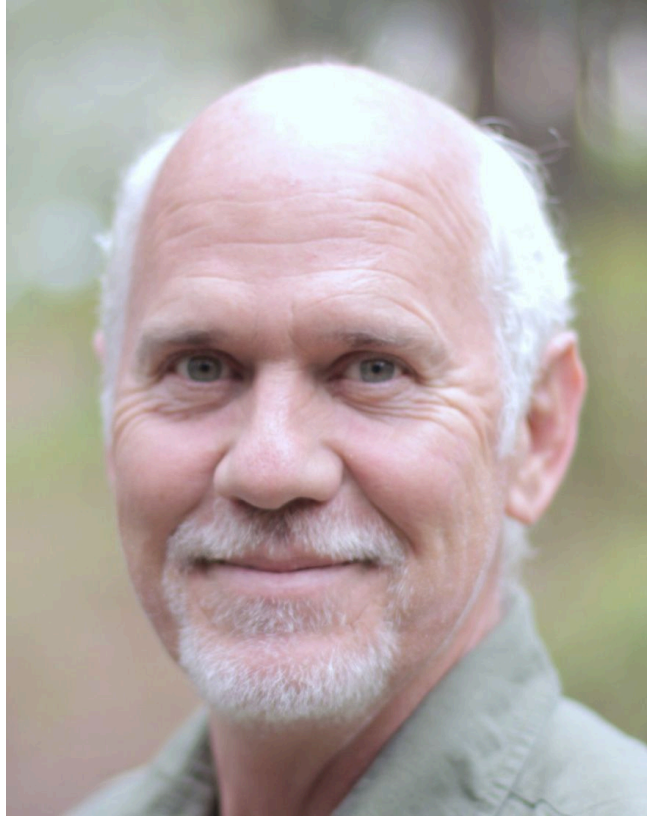

Guest Column: Democratic Party mission: Rural representation

July 18, 2022



Last weekend, I represented Del Norte County Democrats at the Executive Board meeting of the California Democratic Party in Los Angeles. The Executive Board meets once or twice a year to take care of business in between the much larger convention.

When I attend meetings with the state party, I persistently have one mission, to increase awareness and improve representation of rural issues.

There are more than 10 million Democrats in California, and about 3,500 delegates to the state convention. The Executive Board is comprised of 394 representatives from the 58 California counties apportioned by population. Based on this formula Del Norte County has one Executive Board representative, and that is me.

This ratio of one to 394 is symbolic of our representation in the State Senate and Assembly. Because there is a much larger contingent of Senators and Assembly members from urban areas, they often are not aware and do not consider how new legislation will affect us in rural California.

This lopsided representation was one of the complaints of the proponents of the State of Jefferson. They felt under-represented and wanted to secede from California to form a new state. I disagreed with the strategy of insulting our elected officials and stepped up to lead the opposition against this wrongheaded proposal.

In 2014, 59 percent of the voters in Del Norte County rejected the State of Jefferson. After this I helped to build a coalition of rural county leaders to defeat Jefferson in every other county that they showed up. By 2016, we put the final nail in the Jefferson coffin when voters in conservative Lassen County declined to join the State of Jefferson.

As I was traveling to meet with people in other rural counties, I found that we have a lot of shared concerns. More than once I was told that they would go along with us to oppose the State of Jefferson if we would promise not to forget about the real challenges that rural counties face. This is a promise that I have kept.

One very positive outcome of this campaign is that we built a lasting alliance of rural California counties. With this energized base to build from, we decided to build a stronger advocacy for rural issues.

I remember Jefferson proponents blaming those people in Los Angeles trying to screw with rural counties. I would counter that urban politicians are simply not aware of our issues, and we have an obligation to help them understand rural issues more fully.

The momentum from our rural advocacy has led to a stronger rural caucus within the California Democratic Party. In 2018, we were able to convince the Party to allow us to write a rural plank for the party platform, which is statement of values and principles. A platform is made up of planks on various topics like education, seniors, energy, and the environment etc. It is what we stand for.

The Rural Plank spells out detailed issues of concern in rural communities. The first bullet item states that California Democrats will, “encourage elected officials to consider the effect on rural California when proposing new policies or programs by evaluating whether the outcome is fair and feasible in rural communities.” This is the guiding principle that we ask all State Senate and Assembly members to consider.

When I was at the Executive Board meeting, I had a plum opportunity to have a detailed conversation with Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon who represents a district in Los Angeles County. I told him of our county’s concerns about the mandates that are being proposed through the pending Care Court legislation.

I agreed that it was a useful idea, but explained to him that this law is requiring our county to do something that we do not have the resources to do. We do not have a local mental health facility, and have difficulty hiring enough qualified professionals that would be needed to implement this plan.

It was clear that he had not previously been aware of the challenges that we would face and understood the unfairness of fining us for failing to comply.

I suggested that the legislation be modified to be enabling legislation rather than an unfunded mandate with fines for noncompliance. This would allow for counties that are able to exercise this new tool to help those

with severe behavioral disabilities without expecting that rural counties meet the same expectation without additional funding and assistance.

By the end of our conversation, Speaker Rendon suggested that he should come up for a visit. I immediately took him up on this offer. I am following up with Speaker Rendon to arrange a time for him to come up to meet with some of our local elected officials.

This reinforces my belief that if we are persistent in stating our concerns and can propose alternative solutions, that this will increase understanding and improve representation of our rural concerns. If we can do this in a way that is diplomatic rather than insulting, we will get further.

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