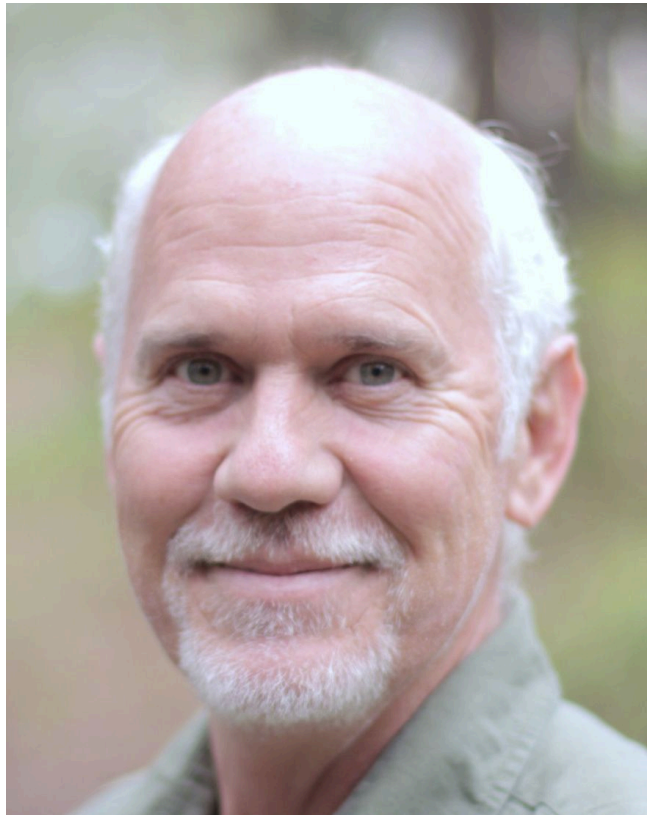

Guest Column: Government of the people

August 1, 2022



I have previously written about the necessity for us to compete for state and federal funding that can help address our needs for public infrastructure, affordable housing, and access to mental health services. Some of these challenges must be addressed by government on a larger scale. However, some problems can be solved at a neighborhood level if neighbors will get involved.

We should not expect “government” to solve all our problems. We are not separate from government. We are a part of it. We are a government of the people.

I recently attended an extraordinary neighborhood event in a local park organized by Supervisor Susan Masten. This was a follow-up to the townhall meetings that she held several months ago, to review the feedback and discuss next steps. This was a stellar example of bringing government to a community level.

One of the primary concerns expressed by the people at these town hall meetings is public safety. In response to this, Supervisor Masten invited our new Sheriff Garrett Scott, who was very generous with his time.

As you may be aware the Sheriff department is seriously understaffed. Even though there is progress in filling vacant positions, there are limits to what can be done at this time. On that day, after the meeting Sheriff Scott was filling in on patrol duty. I do appreciate his dedication.

Eventually the conversation turned to a discussion of neighborhood watch groups. One attendee described how she and her neighbors watch out for each other. Neighborhood watch groups can provide additional eyes and ears to help the Sheriff Department to be more effective.

This is a good example of government of the people, when the people stand up to confront a problem, rather than just expecting centralized government to fix it for them. I have heard Supervisor Masten say more than once that many problems can and should be solved by people at the community level.

The National Neighborhood Watch (nnw.org) provides information on how to work with local law enforcement agencies to start a new neighborhood watch. These are not intended to cover sprawling geographic areas. A neighborhood watch group could be as small as a single cul-de-sac.

Residents also shared their concerns with Sheriff Scott about the homeless camps in their neighborhood. The fifth district has some of the largest homeless encampments in the county.

As if on cue, Daphne Cortese-Lambert, the Director of Homeless Services for Del Norte Mission Possible, happened to be driving by and decided to drop into the meeting. She explained that she knows most of these homeless people through her non-profit agency's work with the Point in Time count, volunteer clean ups and homeless services program.

As I was observing her interactions with community members and the Sheriff, it occurred to me that there is a natural synergy that could lead to a more effective response to the homeless "problem." Rather than treating the homeless as an amorphous mass of unwanted humanity, there may be an opportunity to treat them as individuals with individual needs.

Sheriff Scott also responded to questions about how Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT) could supplement the available Sheriff Department staff. A CIT would involve trained behavioral health professionals that can counsel people who are facing distress due to a lack of housing, or a mental health or substance use crisis.

There are times when an emergency call does not require an armed response. In fact, Sheriff Scott acknowledged that sometimes a uniformed officer can escalate the situation. With due respect to the sheriff deputies, they are not trained to manage complicated behavioral health issues.

If a Crisis Intervention Team can respond in appropriate situations, then deputies can be deployed only where they are most needed. This may relieve some strain on the limited personnel.

Sheriff Scott is working with Del Norte County Behavioral Health to come up with a plan to initiate Crisis Intervention Teams in our county. There may be state or federal grants that will fund this which will help the Sheriff's budget stretch a little bit farther.

We should always be looking for viable partnerships between the government, non-profit groups, and the citizenry to address our local needs. Don't just sit back and wait for someone else to take care of it. Get involved. Volunteer for a non-profit group, start a neighborhood watch or help with a community clean up.

If members of the public get more involved in our community, then we will more likely have a government of the people, by the people and for the people.

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