



## Commentary

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### Messages to the new board

#### Part One: Give us a level playing field

#### **the Executive Committee of the Sierra Club Santa Lucia Chapter**

The June election set the stage for a seismic shift of power on the County Board of Supervisors, the government entity that has the most direct impact on the quality of life in San Luis Obispo. The result was a clear mandate: out with the old majority, whose lips said no! no! to sprawl development and unsustainable growth, while their votes said yes! yes! to expensive rural subdivisions on agricultural land, to massive sprawl in the form of such projects as San Miguel Ranch, to such ag “clusters” as Santa Margarita Ranch and Laetitia, and to unsustainable growth from Shandon to Nipomo. The old board put a big hurt on community water resources, roads, and other infrastructure. They proclaimed allegiance to smart growth, affordable housing, and protecting ag land, but ensured that the goal of affordable housing remained just out of reach, and more and more ag land, open space and wildlife habitat got rolled over.

Many people who were fed up with business as usual contributed their dialing fingers and shoe leather toward June’s electoral outcome. Volunteers from the environmental community diligently worked to oust the board majority that has wielded the rubber stamp for special interests. (“special interest, n: a person or group having an interest in a particular part of the economy and receiving or seeking special advantages therein, often to the detriment of the general public,” Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary). The Sierra Club endorsed Supervisor Jim Patterson and Supervisor-elect Adam Hill, and worked to assure their victory over their developer-bankrolled rivals. But our work is not done. Turning the ship of county government will take all hands on deck and on the helm.

We’d like to offer Mssrs. Hill, Mecham, Gibson, Patterson, and Achadjian some ideas for achieving a sustainable future for SLO County. This is the first of five monthly commentaries that will recommend how, when the new board takes office, the public can shape our county’s destiny.

Our first recommendations regard money and transparency. The public process would dramatically improve with much less of the former and much more of the latter. Before they do anything else, we hope the new board will take a long, hard look at local campaign financing and the access of special interests to the levers of power. We must assure that elections cannot be bought and that the public process is transparent. The public has the legal right to expect that board decisions will provide equal protection under the law and equal application of the law.

Special interests with business before the board give enormous sums of money to board candidates and have disproportionate access to supervisors, who then vote on projects that return even larger amounts

of money back to that “supporter.” There is now no public disclosure required from the supervisors about any relevant meetings they had on an issue they’re about to vote on, or who they met with. The public has the right to know.

We would like to see the new board direct its staff to recommend a formal process for ex parte reports on each issue on which the board will take official action; develop recommendations for county policies on keeping phone records, calendar entries and other information regarding the supervisors’ county-related activities, and recommend procedures to establish a credible document-management system for county files to facilitate responses to public requests for information.

County supervisor campaigns have become obscenely expensive. Special interests associated with the development community donate generously to make certain they are well represented. Raising money has become a candidate’s primary goal, distracting voters from the important issues that should be the focus of campaigns. The future of our county should not be for sale to the highest bidder.

A level playing field means that money cannot buy influence. To that end, the new board should direct its staff to: provide options for the implementation of an Election Campaign Finance Reform ordinance that includes, at the minimum, limits to the amount any one person can donate to a candidate for supervisor and other county offices; prohibitions against, or limits to donations from PACS and other entities; and timing and reporting requirements for donations.

There are many examples of local governments, including the City of San Luis Obispo, that have implemented ordinances to regulate campaign financing in their elections. Recently on the state level, we saw the passage of AB 583, which, if signed by the governor and approved by the voters in 2010, will try out the model of voluntary full public financing for Secretary of State candidates in the next two elections.

“Clean money” is gathering steam everywhere. Why not try it here?

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The Santa Lucia Chapter represents the Sierra Club’s 2,500 members in San Luis Obispo County. The Executive Committee includes Karen Merriam, Jack Morrow, John Ashbaugh, Cleve Nash, Steven Marx, Judith Bernstein, and Cal French.