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Let's not beat around the basin

Supervisors need to step out of their political comfort zones

BY ANDREW CHRISTIE

Mr. Christie suggested, you know, we'd be selling out to big dollars. Nobody's ever bought my vote for anything. I'm only intimidated by three things: my wife, my god, and my daughter; and not necessarily in that order."

—Supervisor Frank Mecham, Aug. 6, 2013, SLO County Board of Supervisors meeting

Supervisor Mecham is cross with me. The occasion for the above remark was the Board of Supervisors' hearing on the menu of options that may be included in an emergency ordinance to curtail the depletion of the Paso Robles Groundwater Basin, a water supply that is now rapidly failing due to the explosive growth of North County vineyards. A proposed ordinance is coming to the board for a vote on Aug. 27.

In my testimony, I quoted Mr. Mecham's prior comment on this issue and the potential creation of a water district to manage the basin, "I just hope that we are not in the situation where the guy with the most money wins." I said that the Sierra Club shares his hope, and pointed out the obvious: "If any county supervisor votes against an urgency ordinance, or tries to weaken it, or delay or postpone, you will be telling every resident of this county 'the guy with the most money won my vote.'"

Mr. Mecham may not care to parse the difference, but the guy with the most money *winning* your vote is not the same thing as the guy with the most money *buying* your vote. I did not say that I think Mr. Mecham is accepting bags of cash behind the county government center. Rather, in the midst of the county's worst water crisis in memory, I was encouraging Supervisor Mecham, as well as Supervisor COLAB—sorry, I mean Supervisor Arnold—to set aside the short-term financial interests of their ideological allies whose donations have comprised the bulk of their campaign contributions. If the basin is to be saved, both Mecham and Arnold will need to step outside of their political comfort zone and do the right thing.

It is a stark choice. The 100 new well permit applications filed the week of the Aug. 6 board hearing, seeking to stick the maximum number of straws into the basin before the county potentially declares the party's over, embody the interests of a certain constituency. That constituency is also represented by the frenzy of "new planting" markers—white stakes now sprouting all over North County vineyards, making them look like a wine grape version of a cemetery, as a local resident memorably phrased it.

Mecham and Arnold could choose to protect that constituency. Or they could observe this frantic scene of grab-all-you-can-get, say "that's not right," and vote for an urgency ordinance to stop it.

At the Aug. 6 meeting, Mecham was pushing to restrict any such ordinance to the smallest area where the basin's water table has been found to have dropped the farthest. This is a bad idea that would only make matters worse by restricting water use in the "red zone," thereby pushing those uses onto the rest of the distressed basin and quickly turning all of it into red zones. But he has journeyed some distance from his position last May, when he referred to an urgency ordinance as "the land-use hammer that we seem to want to be so progressive trying to put on things."

Arnold, on the other hand, has displayed no appetite for any kind of ordinance. On Aug. 6, she

appeared to be attending a different board meeting in her head, occasionally phasing back in to offer ideas that Mecham had to tell her were “not the topic.” Supervisor Bruce Gibson explained to her what an ordinance is and how it works and why her suggestions couldn’t be part of one.

But the heart of the problem is that Mecham and Arnold will not just have to step out of their comfort zone to come to grips with reality and halt the depletion of the groundwater basin; they will have to confront the failure of the ideology that has guided them throughout their political careers and presumably most of their adult lives: the philosophy of endless growth; the belief that the economy is somehow separate from and much more important than the environment—which, at best, is there to look pretty as backdrop for tree-planting photo ops and the rest of the time is a burdensome nuisance to be gotten around when issuing development permits.

If, by the time of the board’s Aug. 27 meeting, both supervisors are unable to break with that belief at least on this issue, we will be headed for the desertification of Paso Robles and the end of the road for that philosophy in our neck of the woods when Mother Nature, in that way she has, bats last.

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