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Mountain Democrat

Monday, August 11, 2014

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99 CENTS

The balancing act: A survey designed to create change

By Larry Weitzman

From page A4 | June 02, 2014 |

According to the Sacramento Bee's latest editorial, El Dorado County lives in the dark ages, "a rough and tumble mentality, a culture that pervades county government." Most of this supposed revelation is identified in a climate assessment survey designed and given by the law firm Van Dermyden Maddux discussed in the last Balancing Act.

The Bee claims it confirmed what people thought about working for the county that workers are afraid to speak up for fear of retribution, favoritism, nepotism and bullying. They cited one employee who said "most of us feel hopeless and come to work out of obligation instead of wanting to." Notice how one person speaks for everyone.

Hey, I got news for the Bee, most people work because of obligation, like having transportation, housing, food, clothing, and medical care and so on. Most people would not work if they didn't have to. Who likes getting up at 5 a.m. or earlier and then fighting traffic for a couple of hours or more a day getting to work to do the same thing over and over again. That's why it is called work, not fun. Not many people get to do their dream job, like a Hollywood actor or a race car driver. And for the same reason people play the lottery so they hopefully will never have to work again.

A recent report said that most people view work as a source of stress, which brings us back to the Van Dermyden Maddux survey, which, it can be said, was designed to create a problem and was presented that way by Sue Van Dermyden. In a clarification published in the Mountain Democrat, at Van Dermyden's presentation she said many employees consider they are working within a "culture of fear." She went on to say that "60 percent of the respondents were generally satisfied with their employment with the county...40 percent are not happy."

Van Dermyden intentionally slanted the results. First, 17 percent said they were not satisfied and 23 percent said they were neutral. Nowhere was the word "happy" used. It appears Van Dermyden was attempting to exaggerate the results to demonstrate problems that do not exist. If you reread the last Balancing Act, you will find 90 percent rate of employees saying the county delivers a high level of public service and their work makes a difference.

If that isn't enough, our county employees are well paid, just getting a big raise. All job salaries are listed on the county's Website. The numbers might surprise you, like the head dog catcher earning \$98,000 a year, plus retirement and benefits.

So what did the Board of Supervisors do? Along with the already spent \$140,000, they have authorized another \$250,000 to start a climate action plan. How much employee time will be wasted and how much more will it cost? It is easy to spend money when it is Other People's Money, the OPM of government, politics and power. If you think county employees are unhappy now, wait until this crap is foisted on

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HOME

NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

REAL ESTATE

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

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


1 of 7

them. Don't you love sensitivity training and political correctness carried out to the nth degree. Can't we all get along? The BOS forgot about one thing — human nature. It will never change. It sounds like the beginning of a Communist Chinese re-education camp.

The last question of the survey, question 35, asked for "topics you would like to discuss such as: retaliation, harassment, equal employment opportunity issues, culture, work place civility, etc." Here was a chance to specifically lay it out, tell it like it is. Of the more than 1,900 people who were sent the survey, here are the real numbers, retaliation 18, harassment 11, culture 11, workplace civility 7, hostile work environment 2, and favoritism 1. And respondents could list more than one item, so the total number of respondents could be as little as 18. Question 11 asked for the "greatest workplace challenge." Only 47 workers cited harassment, discrimination, workplace bullying, favoritism or retaliation. About the same number as Q 35.

It is obvious that your BOS who paid for this report with your money and the Sacramento Bee did not study the report. They failed the county, a mistake which will cost the county hundreds of thousands, if not millions of dollars.

Search 

HOME

NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

REAL ESTATE

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

CONTACT US

But the Bee wasn't done with eviscerating the taxpayers and citizens of El Dorado County. The Bee editorial board met with soon to be gone board member Norma Santiago and CAO Terry Daly. Looks like our CAO is becoming a politician. As a result the Bee made a suggestion, surely at the behest of the politicking Daly and Santiago who will be out of work soon, that perhaps the county charter should be reformed to eliminate some of the elected officials by changing them to appointed positions, starting with the County Surveyor and Recorder-Clerk. Neither positions are highly paid (relatively speaking compared to other county salaries), at about \$120,000 a year or about half of Daly's salary. Both of those position have influence and power. The Clerk gets to decide if candidates for office meet the qualification criteria for that office and the Surveyor is the approver of new tracts and developments. And such an appointment would be a nice raise for Santiago.

But more important is that such a move would create more of a spoils system and give much more power and influence to the CAO, which is how the CAO sees the county anyway. A quick study of the organizational chart drawn by the CAO shows that all department heads, including the elected ones report to her. Daly thinks the auditor-controller reports to her. Aren't foxes the best guards of a hen house? If the BOS wants to get rid of the antiquated ways of elections and bring back the spoil system, it would be a significant step backwards. And such a result would create a real crony county. More to come.

It needs to be stressed that Van Dermyden Maddux would not reveal how the El Dorado County study stacks up to other jurisdictions. Without that information we cannot determine a baseline.

Also they would not reveal how many surveys were sent to current and past employees and their respective response rates plus looking at each group separately. That is important information. It makes the bias in the presentation even more compelling.

Larry Weitzman is a biweekly columnist for the Mountain Democrat.

Comments

1 comments



2 of 7

PROVIDED BY L. WEITZMAN
#31 8/12/14

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PLACERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

99 CENTS

The balancing act: Being nonpartisan doesn't stop politics

By Larry Weitzman

From page A4 | May 19, 2014 |

Running for office in El Dorado County, as non partisan as it is supposed to be (no party affiliations), is still loaded with plenty of dirty politics. And it looks like there is a need of a large laundromat to clean up the schmutz being hurled by some members of the Board of Supervisors and certain high-ranking and highly paid county employees.

About three weeks ago a \$140,000 report authorized and paid for by Board of Supervisors and written by Van Dermynen Maddux called the Climate Assessment Summary of Survey Results of the El Dorado County Workplace was published. The survey was started in late January and completed on April 2. It was sent to 1,934 current and former county employees from whom there were 1,249 responses. While not clear if these were additional participants, there were 45 telephonic or in-person interviews. That would mean there were 1,294 participants.

One of the results of this survey was the demand for the censuring of Joe Harn, the county auditor-controller. It appears the reason for the censuring is one county employee is claiming Joe is a bully and people in the county workforce live in a "climate of fear." The main complainer is a public relations person in Terri Daly's CAO office. His name is Mike Applegarth and he says Joe is a bully. He makes or states no specific incidents or "facts," but he stands up before the BOS and makes unsubstantiated, nonspecific accusations in a sniveling diatribe, saying people are "literally crying over how he's treating them." What a wimp. This guy makes more than a hundred grand a year "working" for EDC and I would like to know for what, for writing press releases? If the CAO does her job correctly, no boasting by press releases would be necessary. Of course two board members, Briggs and Nutting lauded Applegarth for his coming forward, but could this be more retaliation against Joe, and not for the public good.

Ray Nutting is in a jam right now, his fate in the hands of a jury for taking grant money, filling out forms incorrectly under a declaration of perjury and receiving improper grants under Proposition 40, tens of thousands of dollars of them. He may have filled out those grant forms incorrectly as well. Nutting claims it was all innocent mistakes.

Nutting also claims that the prosecution has been political, saying DA Vern Pierson is playing politics. So what does Nutting do? He recruits his own candidate, Judson Henry, to run against Pierson in the DA's race hoping if elected, he could get the prosecution dropped. Before Henry abruptly quit the race, Henry says his campaign platform was that the DA needs to use more discretion on choosing who to prosecute. Like Ray Nutting?

And one of the reasons that Nutting has a problem at all was because Harn reported these irregularities in his grant forms. But before Joe reported these problems to the DA he told

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NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

REAL ESTATE

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

CONTACT US



3 of 7

Nutting he thought the forms were done in error and he should correct them. But Nutting said his forester helped him do them and he wasn't going to change them. Harn tried to help Nutting, but I guess Nutting thinks he is smarter. Nutting has a college degree. Nutting's actions with respect to Harn appear to suffer from a conflict of interest, too, accepting hearsay and nonspecific allegations as fact. While Nutting was convicted on several misdemeanors, he appears to have skated on all but one felony which appeared to be hung.

But more important are facts and there are plenty of them contained in this \$140,000 waste of money. The data and responses show that bullying is not a problem in the county, especially in the Auditor's office. Overall 60 percent of county workers expressed satisfaction working for the county. Twenty-three percent were neutral and 17 percent were dissatisfied. The Auditor's-Controller's Office received a 92 percent satisfaction rating, tying it for second place in overall satisfaction with the Library. The Assessor's Office had 78 percent and County Counsel received a score of 86 percent. People like working for Joe Harn, a lot.

Now let's look at departments within the Chief Administrator's Office's purview, where Mike Applegarth works. Information Technology got a satisfaction score of 41 percent while the CAO's Community Development Agency received the lowest score in the county at 22 percent. In general if there are problems with employee satisfaction, Mr. Applegarth should look inward, not outward.

But it only gets better. Eighty-six percent of the respondents to the survey answered the question of what is the MOST desirable aspect of your workplace with comments in the following way. About 88 percent of the 86 percent said the most desirable aspect of the workplace are (in descending order of percentage), the People, the Work Environment, or the Work itself. Fourth and fifth were compensation and location. But the dominant No. 1 answer was the people.

Let's get to bullying, which Applegarth thinks is so pervasive. Out of all the responses of workplace challenges only 47 responded with one of the following: Favoritism, harassment, discrimination, workplace bullying or retaliation. And out of the five comments listed by employees, only ONE referred to bullying.

In the final question of the survey which asked for general topics that the employee would like to discuss only 11 out of the 1,934 surveyed mentioned harassment.

As to more positives, 92 percent said they have direct access to their supervisor; 92 percent also said their supervisor communicates with them either daily (66 percent) or weekly (26 percent).

Eighty-eight percent said that their supervisor communicates with them, in a professional and respectful manner. Eighty-seven percent said that their department provides a high level of public service and adding to that very high number was a 91 percent response saying that their work makes a difference to the citizens of El Dorado County.

Auditor-Controller Joe Harn has the toughest job in the county in this respect. he Internal Revenue Service audits taxpayers to keep them honest. How many people like IRS auditors, perhaps the most unloved job in the nation? The county auditor's job is to keep the rest of the county honest and doing things correctly, making sure the paperwork is perfect and constantly correcting county employee errors, looking over their shoulder on fiscal matters and just plain keeping them honest. His job isn't to be liked or loved, it is to protect the taxpayers' money. Just as with an IRS auditor who comes to your house saying, "I'm from the IRS and I'm here to

Search

HOME

NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

REAL ESTATE

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

CONTACT US



4 of 7

help you," the auditor probably elicits the same response from some county employees.

Our county assessor, Karl Weiland, said it best: "I always understood that the Auditor's role is a fiscal watchdog, and watchdogs have to be ready to bark, and sometimes bite. Most everybody at the county has needed to respond to challenges from our Auditor about expenditures and proposals for use of the public money. It comes with the job. Want a nice friendly companion dog? Get a lab. But don't expect it to stop burglars."

The numbers speak for themselves and perhaps this survey which cost you \$140,000 backfired with respect to the BOS. This appears to have been a planned, orchestrated witch hunt against the auditor and it turns out that he runs one of the best departments in the county. Reports of bullying appear to be highly exaggerated and specious at best. It's nice to know that about 90 percent of county employees have positive things to say about working for EDC.

In a conversation with Deborah Maddux, Partner in the law firm who did the survey, she would not reveal how EDC numbers stacked up to other jurisdictions that they have surveyed.

Coming soon, if you think our BOS is done spending on political correctness, think again. They have already authorized another \$250,000 for a "climate change action plan" (and no, I am not talking about the weather), which will lead to even more wasted money, probably in excess of a million dollars. According to our Sheriff, \$250,000 would pay for two more full-time deputies for a year.

Larry Weitzman is a biweekly columnist for the Mountain Democrat.

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HOME

NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

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COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

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News

School travel expenses misleading

By Wendy Schultz | From Page: A1

Dist. 2 campaign spending reports in

By Dawn Hodson | From Page: A1

Percy on the case: EDC Fire gets arson investigation dog

By Cole Mayer | From Page: A1 | Gallery

Water saving enabled new field

By Wendy Schultz | From Page: B1 | Gallery

Heard over the back fence: 20-Mile Taste Aug. 16

By Bob Billingsley | From Page: B1

Sign Ordinance near home stretch

By Chris Daley | From Page: A1

5 of 7

PROVIDED BY L. WEITZMAN
#31 8/12/14

Mountain Democrat

Monday, August 11, 2014

PLACERVILLE, CALIFORNIA

99 CENTS

The balancing act: Grand jury gobbledy-gook

By Larry Weitzman

From page A4 | July 14, 2014 |

Dysfunction is the key word within the title of the new Grand Jury report published on June 20 regarding the El Dorado County Charter. Most if not all Grand Juries are supposed to be fact-finders, and although I didn't examine the entire report to see if other areas of the report had fact-finding or opinion, the Dysfunction section discussed here was mostly opinion or statements with absolutely no factual basis.

This section of the report is supposed to be the basis for Terri Daly's campaign to make her the Fuhrer of El Dorado County. Fuhrer in German means guide or leader, but most people think of Fuhrer as a dictator, and not a benevolent one. The report has Terri Daly's fingerprints all over it as if she not only wrote the report but drafted the charter changes recommended by the GJ and submitted to the Charter Review Committee. Why? Because the report is full of opinion and statements that have no factual basis and the way the Grand Jury referred to the CAO within the report itself. Grand Juries are supposed to be fact finders not opinion writers or editorialists.

Within the six pages are claims for which there is no basis in fact, starting with the "proliferation" of elected officials in El Dorado County. Was that a malapropism or did the GJ not understand what the word "proliferation" means? It sounds like the GJ is trying to find an ant hill in the Himalayas. There hasn't been any new elected office created in the county since the passing of the El Dorado County Charter in 1994. What proliferation is the GJ talking about, the rapid expansion in the last four years in budget and employees in the CAO's office? Then the GJ concludes there should be no elected officials in EDC except those required by California law (the sheriff, district attorney and the assessor). Their reasoning is that the county's elected officers, the BOS and/or its five members interfere in the administration of county business. Of course, they don't cite one example or fact as to what the interference is, how it occurs, when did it happen and why and who did it. Nothing, zero, nada.

The GJ says that the purpose of the BOS is to create and implement the vision for the future of EDC. What is the purpose of the General Plan? While Section 210 (a) (1) of the County Charter says the BOS shall adopt a statement of goals annually reflecting the quality and direction of the activities of county government, it is hardly a vision and the only purpose of the BOS. I got news for the GJ, the ultimate county buck stops with the BOS. They share ultimate responsibility of the administration of EDC business and the BOS changes every two years and some BOS members will have different visions and ideas. It will be ever changing and that "vision" creation is not even a part-time job. It is, to use the GJ's word, esoteric baloney. Here's a county vision: Better, faster and more service and smoother, better roads all for less money. OK, what is a BOS member suppose to do for the next 8,759 hours left in the year?

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OPINION

LETTERS

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COMICS

GALLERY

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
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6 of 7

As reported in the last Balancing Act, the BOS needs to be involved as Amador County is now saddled needlessly with a \$20 million lease obligation because the BOS trusted and did not question sufficiently what the CAO Terri Daly, snuck through at a BOS meeting via the consent calendar. Yes, it's the same Terri Daly who now entrusted with a budget seven times greater than the Amador County budget.

Here are examples of the El Dorado County Grand Jury's conclusions without a factual basis. The GJ states "Recently the imbalance and potential for abuse of power by elected officials has been brought to the public's attention following the county's Workplace Climate Assessment Survey and ensuing significant criticism of the auditor-controller. Whether or not the criticisms directed at the controller are true..." The GJ makes a conclusion while admitting it doesn't know if it's true or not. In fact, the Climate Assessment Survey said nothing of the auditor-controller and, in fact, gave the auditor-controller some of the highest marks in the survey, while giving the CAO's office some of the lowest marks. But the GJ didn't say a word about of the negative remarks or facts derived by the survey regarding CAO or assistant CAO. The Grand Jury obviously did not study the report. They were not interested in fact finding.

Search 

HOME

NEWS

OPINION

LETTERS

SPORTS

PROSPECTING

ESSENTIALS

OBITUARIES

REAL ESTATE

COMICS

GALLERY

CLASSIFIEDS

ADVERTISERS

COUPONS

CONTACT US

Want more? At the beginning of the very next paragraph the GJ wrote, "Although the GJ did not investigate the allegations made against the auditor-controller following the county's Workplace Assessment, the GJ received substantial testimony from a number of witnesses..." If they didn't investigate the allegations against the auditor-controller they obviously didn't do a proper fact-finding and therefore shouldn't say anything that isn't backed by facts, which they again obviously did not ascertain. This GJ report is strictly anecdotal and its recommendations should be disregarded. There is no factual basis for its conclusions. This Grand Jury report was nothing more than a continuation of a witch hunt.

The GJ's rant isn't limited to certain elected officials, it also disses the electorate when it says "the electorate has no valid basis for evaluating the performance of officials performing the specialized and sometimes esoteric (now there is a word to show just how smart the GJ is) duties of these offices." What, the CAO who wants to select these people herself is an expert? Yeah, sure. Our CAO has already shown herself to be untrustworthy with some of her appointments and a terrible business person. Ask Amador County.

As to the Grand Jury's idea of a government that is a harmonious love fest, forgetaboutit. If you want a government without disagreement or dissent, try a dictatorship. Everyone is a yes man to the dictator or head of government. That is what makes the American government so different. It is created with checks and balances and competing ideas to most everything, and you want that provided for in its structure, such as elected officials facing the voters every four years and that includes the BOS. One thing we don't want is a runaway government and that's what you will get with the Grand Jury's baseless recommendations. Surprising is that notwithstanding the Sac Bee's very limited investigation and evaluation of the GJ "Dysfunction" report in its July 5 editorial, the Sac Bee agrees that it is not a good idea to "reduce democracy...for political expediency."

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

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7 of 7