

INTEGRITY OF INFORMATION: THE FOUNDATION FOR GOOD DECISIONS

by Linda Parks, Ventura County Supervisor, May 2008

Our trust in government erodes when their studies are flawed. Sometimes these bad studies are caused by incomplete evaluation, or sometimes a change occurs that could not have been known that makes the study flawed, or sometimes the poor science of a report is deliberate. Of the three ways that can land us with an unsound document, the latter is the most alarming because it implies deceit.

The intent of skewed studies is to justify a particular outcome that may otherwise not be justifiable. Of course paying a third party expert to confirm a position isn't limited to government, we see it in other sectors of our society. The prosecutor against Phil Specter put it this way: "if you hire enough lawyers who hire enough experts who are paid enough money, you can get them to say anything."

Fortunately many experts aren't for sale and they deserve the respect and the money they are paid. This is particularly true because there are hardships they can encounter when they refuse to slant their reports, sometimes resulting in loss of work and income.

From the Federal government to local government, basing decisions on unsound information deepens peoples' distrust of our institutions. When the Federal Drug Administration relies on experts paid by drug manufacturers or the Environmental Protection Agency argues against air quality laws, it is understandable the public questions the integrity of these agencies.

At the local level, reports by consultants hired by developers can have considerable bearing on a project's outcome. For a controversial housing project proposed in the floodway of a river in our county, a councilmember listened to multiple experts testifying the project would be safe and said "at some point you just have to trust."

When biological experts have intentionally hidden findings of endangered plants that would have thrown a monkey wrench into a developer's plan, when traffic engineers fail to accurately distribute car trips because it would have shown higher traffic levels on a particular street thus kicking in more expensive road improvements, when geologists are more than willing to exaggerate or downplay conditions for a paying customer, or when air pollution experts underestimate a development's pollution by using wrong base numbers, you learn it is better to verify than to trust.

The consultant's report for the City of Thousand Oaks was supposed to analyze the possible impacts of the June 3rd Measure B ballot measure. However, many doubt the report's conclusions because of the assumptions it makes. While the ballot measure would require a vote of the people on large development projects that cause severe traffic congestion, the report assumed all large developments would go to the voters. Traffic was not even considered, despite it being the trigger for requiring a vote under Measure B. The report also is flawed

because it factored in projects that have all ready been approved and could not legally go to a vote of the people. Finally, the report assumes that the voters would vote against everything, and as a result the land would never be developed and would just lay dormant forever.

The report errs because not all large projects would go before the voters. Only new, large projects that the Council supports and that cause severe congestion would go to the voters. Obviously the land would not remain dormant because developers could still build less grandiose projects. As we have found with SOAR, voters do approve development. Of the nine times that SOAR has caused a vote of the people, five projects were approved and four were rejected.

Because of the unrealistic assumptions in the Measure B analysis, its conclusions may be completely wrong, and instead of losing revenue with Measure B, our government may actually take in greater revenue. A subsequent UCSB study actually found housing prices would increase if Measure B is approved thus generating more property tax revenue. Conversely, big box development drains sales tax by driving local businesses out of town.

Measure B is intended to fight traffic and preserve neighborhood businesses and as such would help quality of life issues that make the city a desirable place to live. It is quite possible that Measure B will actually increase government revenue by raising our home values and by preserving local businesses while attracting new companies with our enviable quality of life.

As policy makers it is our duty to assure the information we receive is accurate. We must be willing to question unrealistic assumptions and encourage an environment that allows for scrutiny without fear of reprisal. Fortunately we are in the greatest nation on earth where democracy is guaranteed by the constant vigilance and scrutiny of its citizens.