

A BROKEN STATE OF AFFAIRS

By Ventura County Supervisor Linda Parks, March 2010

The State of California is facing a fiscal crisis of historic proportions. With a \$14 billion deficit looming, people who are paid by the State can once again expect to get IOU's. Needed capital projects like freeway maintenance and bridge safety improvements will once again be stopped, and more state offices will be shut down as more employees are furloughed. This is not the way to run a government.

The quick fixes that our legislators are devising rely heavily on borrowing and budget gimmicks, all of which will serve to further deepen future debt. The State is also teetering on the brink of an ever-increasing pension obligation that is unsustainable, with some pensioners making more in retirement than when they worked.

How did it get this way and how do we remedy it? Many of the effective leaders of our past, from Pete Wilson to Ronald Reagan, to Edmund G. Brown, knew they had to reach across the aisle and work with members of the opposite party in order to accomplish good government. Yet in today's environment, legislators risk their seats for bucking the party line to vote for the public good. Moderates are punished and intransigence is rewarded. The partisan politics and divisiveness at the capitol have put our government in a state of gridlock, and real people are the victims.

Special interests have become so powerful at the State capitol that the common citizen's voice has been drowned out. Corporations, Indian casinos, health company political action committees, tobacco, oil and unions exert considerable influence. They help to write legislation and lobby to get it approved. With the recent Supreme Court decision that unleashed corporations from campaign spending limits, the influence of special interests will dominate more government policy and influence more election outcomes. Yet elections are our only means to fix Sacramento.

Several efforts are underway to help remedy the dysfunctional legislature by reducing special interest money and reducing the extremes of both parties. Such remedies include having impartial citizens redraw legislative districts, a ballot measure to have open primaries that will bring more moderates to Sacramento, and a fair elections initiative that uses lobbyists' fees to pay for the next Secretary of State election instead of major contributions. All these measures and more are aimed at changing the composition of the legislature. Voters thought term limits would have helped, but they've become a mockery with a game of musical chairs and spouses that perpetuate the problem.

It is clear that citizens have little regard for Sacramento politicians with polls showing single digit approval ratings, and it will be up to citizens to fix Sacramento, because the politicians there won't do it.