

On My Soap Box About Ventura County Government

By Supervisor Linda Parks, July 2009

Earlier this week I got on my soap box to talk about our county government and fiscal discipline. As we watch the State shut down road projects, release inmates early from prison, cut benefits to the elderly, blind and disabled, close down the State Park system and short change our schools, it becomes glaringly apparent what can happen when government fails to exercise fiscal restraint.

Some of the policies we've implemented on the Board of Supervisors have helped insulate us from the tailspin economics being experienced in Sacramento. In the last six years we've established a series of policies that have strengthened our financial position and led to our County's recent top bond rating by Wall Street.

We've established a healthy reserve, instituted a "pay as you go" policy for funding programs, and established efficiencies to increase service levels and reduce costs to taxpayers. While the Board has had a moratorium on granting increased retirement benefits to county employees, we still must hold the line on salaries and prepare for the inevitable reduction in our workforce.

Although we have an established policy to cut programs when their funding source is cut, we did make an exception for our Sheriff's Department which was facing declining revenue from Proposition 172 funds. This one time policy exception was made because we don't want to see deputies laid-off and public safety compromised. It is our responsibility to provide sufficient resources to keep crime down and ensure quick response times for fire, paramedic, and law enforcement.

Yet in these times of declining resources, it is clear that government cannot continue to operate as it has. One way we can do more with less is by utilizing volunteers. We need citizens to step up to the plate and team with us. For example, citizens can assist our public safety professionals by participating in Community Emergency Response Training, Disaster Area Response Teams, Fire Safe Councils, and Neighborhood Watch programs. We also look to our community partners, including the faith-based community, private sector and

non-profits, to assist our foster youth, the frail-elderly, and other vulnerable populations in our county.

We know that we can't continue to do business as usual. One example is dealing with jail over-crowding. Right now we don't have the funds to build and operate a new jail wing. We are however able to establish effective treatment and placement options for the mentally ill who are in our jails that can end the cycle of homelessness, emergency rooms and jail that confronts them. In addition, we have established programs that work with at-risk youth that have reduced youth incarcerations and saved tax dollars.

We also have to look at doing the business of government in a way that will make our communities desirable places for future generations to live. Encouraging the use of alternative energy and promoting conservation and healthy lifestyles can be done without increased costs--and can actually reduce costs. As an example, our County recently entered into solar energy contracts that will reduce our energy bills, as well as make us less vulnerable to fluctuations in energy demand and market conditions.

Making communities desirable places to live has a lot to do with how we build and our transportation choices. Having walkable communities, low cost and reliable transit options and safe bike routes can lessen the time we waste in traffic and increase our quality of life.

It is also important to continue to protect our environment. Protecting waterways from being polluted and holding polluters accountable can be costly. However, failure to do so can be even more costly as well as having long term impacts. For example, it is far cheaper to keep pollution from going in our waterways than it is to take it out.

As residents of Ventura County, we know the farmland and natural open space areas between our cities add much to our quality of life. I know city officials are tempted to approve developments they would never consider, just so they can get more development and tax funds for their city budgets. As citizens, we must stay involved, help our elected officials make the right decisions and elect people who we can trust with our tax dollars, our environment, our quality of life and our future. I'll get down off my soap box now and wish you a happy and safe Fourth of July!