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## SECOND & FLUME

by **Melissa Daugherty**  
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# Machiavelli's tax

Local conservative politicians and their cronies sure know how to spin things. I've watched them do it repeatedly over the years, perhaps most notably amid the fallout from the Great Recession—and perhaps nobody as adeptly as now—City Manager Mark Sorensen, starting shortly after he was elected to the City Council in 2010.

He'd been a two-time loser during previous election cycles, so you have to give credit to Chico's own Machiavelli. The guy was immune to humiliation, and he's let nothing deter him—not even the unceremonious exit of his well-liked predecessor Mark Orme.

Indeed, his efforts have paid off to the tune of \$207,000 a year, not including a car allowance and generous bennies. That's double what he made for the last decade, as he quietly raked in six figures a year as the administrator of Biggs, a municipality with the same population as Chico High School. Bravo to the least-qualified, highest-paid city manager in Chico's history. (Technically, he's tied for highest salary with Orme.) He's come a long way.

During Sorensen's first term in office a dozen years ago, I watched him and the rest of the council, the then-liberal majority, try to mitigate the effects of the recession. The panel did things like cut overtime, eliminate vacant positions and incentivize early retirements (aka "golden handshakes"). The budget was practically the subject of every council meeting, because it was projected to go millions into the red.

That prospect was largely unavoidable due mostly to the economy, but in part because the city offered some of the most generous salary and benefits packages in the state, compensation that had been approved by both conservative and liberal councils. Eventually, in 2013, the liberal-led panel cut loose dozens of employees, the city's greatest expense.

I was the CN&R's news editor back then and watched Sorensen go from quietly observing newbie to overtly partisan know-it-all. He was the loudest critic of his ideologically divergent colleagues, his favorite target being former Mayor Ann Schwab. He once snidely contended that the city's budget deficit was attributable to her not being able to "read a spreadsheet."

What a load of horse apples. Virtually every municipality in the nation was on the verge of bankruptcy. The global economic collapse ended up being the worst since the Great Depression, though, from what Sorensen was saying, you'd have thought only Chico was having money problems.

To their detriment, the liberals did little to counter the rhetoric. The conservatives swept all three open seats in 2014, ushering in an era of conspicuous community degradation wherein the only efforts to address blight included criminalizing homelessness and demonizing the indigent. Sorensen was instrumental in helping craft the policies that got the city sued for civil rights violations, but the current majority is responsible for enforcing them despite repeated warnings as to their illegality.

Yet, taking a play from Sorensen's handbook, they now want you to believe that they are the ones who've cleaned up the city, as though they weren't forced by a federal judge to provide homeless services. These are the same people who didn't defend the Chico Housing Action Team's planned tiny house community, an effort that would've been privately funded.

And now, despite a predicted recession next year, these typically tax-averse politicians want you to voluntarily increase local sales tax, with no strings attached. That is, the money wouldn't be dedicated to, say, roads and parks—something most Chicanos would get behind—but rather could be used any way the powers-that-be see fit. That could include being spent on the massive debt accruing from Chico's pensions, like the one Sorensen will earn for the rest of his life, based on a salary that's four times the annual household income of the average Chican.

Melissa Daugherty is editor-at-large for the Chico News & Review