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Big challenges for Sacramento County

BY JEFF VONKAENEL / jeffv@newsreview.com

As I write this column on Nov. 6, I do not know who will be replacing Susan Peters as the new Sacramento County supervisor in District 3. She has been one of the five county supervisors for 16 years. Gregg Fishman is currently leading in the race over the more conservative Rich Desmond, endorsed by Peters.

What we do know is that Sacramento County is facing major issues in the coming year, and whoever is elected will have an opportunity to end the current political gridlock among the supervisors and make a real difference for the 1.5 million people living in our county.

While the mayor of Sacramento has our region's most powerful bully pulpit, Sacramento County has the much larger budget. The county's annual budget is about \$6.4 billion compared to the city's \$1.3 billion. It is the county that runs the health and human services programs, as well as providing municipal services for 564,000 residents in the unincorporated area. The city serves only 508,000 residents.

The new county Board of Supervisors will face many critical issues.

First of all, there's Sacramento County Sheriff Scott Jones. At a time when there is much concern about police misconduct and racial profiling, it is imperative that we have confidence in the fairness of local law enforcement. Unfortunately, Jones has not earned that trust.

Sacramento County keeps writing checks, now totaling more than \$20 million for claims of excessive force and sexual harassment in the Sheriff's Office. When Jones denied the inspector general access to his department's records and staff in 2018, it demonstrated how afraid the sheriff was of independent oversight.

But supervisors Phil Serna and Patrick Kennedy could not get a third vote on the board to stand up to Jones. Hopefully either Fishman or Desmond will come through.

Secondly we need more housing, especially

low-income housing, supportive housing and homeless shelters. The county staff should be congratulated and recognized for the ongoing important difference that they are making. But they need significantly more resources to effectively deal with the ever-increasing problems of lack of affordable housing and supportive services.

Red tape is not a building material. And even if we could cut through the red tape and find resources to build supportive housing, there often has not been the political will to overcome neighborhood opposition. We need to support our supervisors when they make unpopular zoning decisions in their districts for the greater good of our entire community.

And finally, the county needs to build trust with the public by increasing transparency and access to the experts on staff, moving away from a habit of communicating via dense bureaucratic reports. There's a great team of talented,

knowledgeable county department heads and technical experts. Do supervisors hear from them directly and regularly, or does their expertise get filtered out?

When we can't hear the experts directly explain complex issues, it appears that important information is being kept from us. Just as Anthony Fauci's straight talk has helped Americans navigate through the pandemic, let's have straight talk from our own local experts about child abuse, mental health, environmental safety, roads, building safety, etc.

With more candor and more backbone, county officials can increase trust and produce real results. And it can start with the new supervisor. □

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Jeff vonKaenel is the president, CEO and majority owner of the News & Review.