

## 2 for supervisor

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### **The Press-Enterprise**

Riverside County voters should keep one issue in the forefront as they elect county supervisors on June 8: county finances. The county requires supervisors willing to cut expenses and reduce spending, despite political pressure. Only then will the county be able to put its budget on a stable footing.

The two candidates best suited to undertake that thorny task are John Tavaglione and John Benoit. Tavaglione, in the 2nd District, is seeking his fifth term on the board. He faces one challenger, Herb Higgins, a former Norco city councilman. Both candidates in this race show a good grasp of county government issues. But they also largely agree on the crucial points, which gives voters no reason to make a change.

Benoit, in the 4th District, has only been on the board since December, when the governor appointed him to replace the late Roy Wilson. But he is a veteran of the Legislature and understands how government works. Benoit faces former Palm Springs Police Chief Gary Jeandron, whose financial support comes mainly from one special interest.

The financial challenges facing Riverside County are huge, and require county government to shift from a boom-years mentality to one of long-term sustainability. The county faces a \$131.5 million gap in the funding that would cover \$744 million in discretionary expenses next year. The board has no credible option but trimming spending to match slumping revenue -- a point Benoit and Tavaglione emphasize.

And both men stress that all county departments will have to contribute savings, even the public safety agencies supervisors have traditionally shielded from budget cuts. Tavaglione and Benoit also agree that the county will need concessions on pay and benefits from county workers to fill the budget shortfall. And both men recognize that county government will need to shrink its 18,000-person work force to more affordable levels.

However, saying the county needs to control spending means little unless the board acts on that goal. The county needs supervisors with the independence and political backbone to withstand budget pressure from employee unions, other county officials and other interest groups.

Supervisors, including Tavaglione, vowed fiscal restraint last year, only to grab nearly \$51 million in reserves to plug budget holes instead of making spending cuts. Tavaglione and Benoit need to be votes for ending that reckless and financially unsustainable approach. Both men have also taken sizable contributions from employee unions, and will need to put allegiance to taxpayers ahead of county workers' interests.

Jeandron is especially troubling in that regard. His campaign is primarily funded by a single special interest -- the sheriff's deputies union, which provided \$220,000 of the \$253,618 in

contributions Jeandron had collected as of March. His extreme reliance on county union money raises serious doubts about how willing he would be to hold the line on employee costs. Nor is that suspicion eased when Jeandron downplays the fiscal threat from the growing expense of pensions.

Benoit and Tavaglione, by contrast, favor reining in a public pension system that is among the most generous in the state -- and keeps soaring in cost. Riverside County will spend \$155 million toward retirement costs this fiscal year, and it projects that figure will climb by \$20 million by 2011-12. The county has to find an additional \$800 million over the next 30 years to cover its pension promises.

Both men propose moving to a two-tier system, with more affordable benefits for newly hired workers. That is the right direction for the county, but requires supervisors willing to put taxpayers' interests first, and push those changes in the face of stiff union opposition.

Changing the county's financial mentality will not be easy, but supervisors cannot responsibly avoid that adjustment. John Benoit and John Tavaglione are the best choices for voters who wish to see fiscal restraint.