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Benoit is the proper successor

The Desert Sun

The late Roy Wilson did an excellent job representing the Coachella Valley on the Riverside County Board of Supervisors for 15 years.

His successor should be the best possible representative available. The Desert Sun agrees with the choice made by Wilson himself: state Sen. John Benoit, R-Bermuda Dunes.

The board of supervisors voted 3-0, with Supervisor Bob Buster absent, to encourage the governor to appoint Benoit. Since then, a parade of other lawmakers -- including several fiscal conservatives -- have stepped up to support Benoit.

The primary argument against Benoit is not his qualifications, which are stellar, but the cost of replacing him when he vacates his state Senate seat.

According to Registrar of Voters Barbara Dunmore, it would take two 2010 elections to fill Benoit's seat. A special vacancy primary would likely be held on April 13. A special vacancy general election would be held on June 8 -- coincidentally, the same date of the election to fill Wilson's seat.

Governor spokesman Mike Naple said there is no set schedule on the appointment, but Schwarzenegger hopes to fill the position quickly. And though a decision has not been made, "The governor is looking to fill the position with a well-qualified candidate," he said.

Dunmore has been unable to estimate the costs, but they must be substantial.

The cost of a special primary election for state Senate District 26 in March in Los Angeles was \$2.2 million, according to the Los Angeles County registrar's Web site. The general election was part of a consolidated election that cost \$28 million. The L.A. County registrar could not estimate how much of that expense was incurred by the special election.

This is bad news for a county that just learned the state budget cuts amount to a \$50 million hit on its coffers.

The state does not reimburse counties for special elections, Dunmore said, although some counties have obtained special legislation and received reimbursement.

However, as Benoit puts it, "It is a cost of doing business."

The issues that face the 4th District -- smart growth, the environment, renewable energy and much more -- are too important to entrust to a placeholder. We need a high-caliber and knowledgeable veteran of public policy issues. Benoit fits that bill.

Benoit is a solid fiscal conservative and an experienced legislator. He spent 31 years in law enforcement, serving as a California Highway Patrol commander in Indio starting in 1988.

He also served on the Desert Sands Unified School District board and for three two-year terms in the California Assembly before moving to the state Senate last year.

In our endorsement of Benoit last year, we called him a consensus builder. He showed in the Assembly an ability to reach across the aisle. That hasn't changed in the Senate.

In his six years in the Assembly, 35 of his bills were signed into law. In his nine months in the Senate, one has been signed into law, extending good Samaritan protection for disaster service volunteers. Three more Benoit bills are on the governor's desk.

It adds up to effective work for a lawmaker from the minority party.

Our five supervisors make critical decisions for more than 2 million residents of Riverside County. Their decisions are often more important to us than the issues debated in Sacramento.

Perhaps Benoit's most important quality is that he was a longtime friend of Roy Wilson. We hope the statesmanship so revered in Wilson has rubbed off over the years.

Wilson's widow, Aurora, told the supervisors that her husband knew Benoit for 20 years and said Benoit was someone he had "complete confidence in to serve the needs of all the people."

In American democracy, outgoing leaders don't get to choose their successors. But in this case, Wilson made the right choice. The one-time cost of two elections should not prevent the governor from appointing John Benoit.

Benoit backers

Riverside County Board of Supervisors, including the late Roy Wilson.

U.S. Reps. Mary Bono Mack and Ken Calvert.

Riverside County Sheriff Stan Sniff.

Every council member in Indian Wells, Palm Desert and Rancho Mirage, as well as elected leaders and police chiefs in other desert cities.

Eleven Republican senators, including Senate Republican Leader Dennis Hollingsworth, and 14 Assembly members.