

November 30, 2009

Monday's Newsmakers: Sen. John Benoit ready to serve as county supervisor

*James Folmer
The Desert Sun*

John Benoit of Bermuda Dunes will resign from the California Senate today. On Tuesday, he will be sworn as the Riverside County supervisor representing the 4th District, which covers most of the Coachella Valley.

Benoit, 57, served 31 years in law enforcement, mostly with the California Highway Patrol. He was commander of the Indio CHP station from 1988 to 2001.

Benoit served on the Desert Sands Unified School District board from 1999 to 2002. He was elected to the state Assembly 2002 and served until term limits forced him out in 2008.

He was elected to the state Senate in November 2008, where he served until today.

Benoit has a bachelor's degree in public safety from Cal State Los Angeles and a master's in public administration from Cal State San Bernardino. He speaks fluent Spanish.

When Roy Wilson stepped down from the county Board of Supervisors in August, he recommended that Benoit become his successor. Wilson died a few days later.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Benoit to his new position on Nov. 4.

Question: How will your experience in the California Legislature help in your new role on the Riverside County Board of Supervisors?

My experience in the Legislature will be beneficial to the Board of Supervisors in several areas. I forged strong working and personal relationships with many of my former colleagues that I will utilize to further the county's legislative agendas.

I also fostered and maintain relationships throughout the administration and state agencies. I understand the state process and organization and how it relates to local county government. Many of the issues I was intimately involved with in Sacramento such as public safety, energy, water and transportation, are top priorities for the 4th District and the county as a whole.

Like the state, the county faces major budget challenges. The shortfall is estimated at \$70 million. What are your ideas on balancing the county budget?

The fiscal picture remains grim, and a quick economic rebound is not going to occur. County revenues are down \$20 million in the current year. The reality is that more cuts will be made.

All areas of county government have to tighten our collective belts. We should not continue to use reserve funds to backfill gaps in the budget. We must maintain a responsible rainy day reserve fund. We must not dig ourselves deeper into this hole.

I will continue to work with our federal representatives to attract stimulus funds for use on infrastructure construction that will create jobs. We are also rapidly developing alternative energy projects that will employ people in the Coachella Valley.

What is your position on the detention center proposed near Whitewater?

Riverside County needs more jail beds. The fact is that we must release most prisoners after they serve just a fraction of their sentences. Criminals are realizing that getting caught doesn't necessarily mean they will be punished, so the deterrent effect is minimal. And, as the county continues to grow, it will get even worse.

The Whitewater site environmental impact report was just released for public review. I will be listening and studying during the public comment period to hear the remarks from both the support and the opposition to this specific jail site.

The county expects to complete the 600-bed expansion of the Banning Jail in March. With the budget shortfall, it's going to be hard to staff that jail. How will the county be able to staff the 7,200-bed detention center?

The plan is to build the jail in three phases over a period of years. The first phase will consist of up to 2,000 beds, and require 763 staff positions. Currently, providing funding for that number is problematic. Likely, the first phase will not be complete for a few years, and hopefully, the county's economic situation will be in a stronger position.

The important point to remember is we must continue to responsibly plan for Riverside County's growth. In this time of recession, public works projects provide jobs. Additionally, project bids are coming in at up to half the cost of just three years ago.

Why should residents of the Coachella Valley, which isn't connected to the State Water Project, support the \$11 billion bond for the Delta water projects? Can the state accommodate that much more debt?

In Southern California, about 30 percent of our water supply is provided by the State Water Project. Since Delta water can't be delivered here, our water agencies have adopted a "bucket to bucket" exchange agreement, trading our entitlements for additional Colorado River water. This exchange has largely sustained our valley aquifer.

Without our aquifer, we would not inhabit our desert communities. Because of California's reliance on imported water, and because our draw on Colorado River water will be capped in 2017, a resolution to our state water crisis is imperative.

While the bond will increase the state's indebtedness, the cost of doing nothing, in my estimation, is far greater.