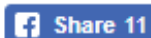


Bob Branstrom: More than transparency

Article

Comments (8)



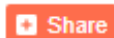
Share 11



Tweet



Pin it



Share



A A+



Local public agencies are subject to the Brown Act, which sets the minimum standard for transparency in conducting the public's business.

I emphasize that this is a minimum standard and believe that it works well for routine business. But, on major issues, our Sierra foothills residents want and deserve to have a more active role in the democratic process. On these issues, public agencies need more than transparency; they need to actively engage the public. This builds public trust and creates better solutions.

The Nevada County Board of Supervisors learned this lesson regarding cannabis regulation. Despite a high level of public comment urging regulation of cannabis, the board instead banned cannabis cultivation in the county. After the public failed to support Measure W, thereby opposing the ban, the board seems to have moved to a more pragmatic approach of engaging the public.

The community advisory group that began meeting in May includes representatives from the cannabis community, opponents of cannabis, and neighborhood representatives. Together, these individuals represent the diverse interests surrounding cannabis within our community.

More importantly, these individuals collectively hold a level of knowledge and expertise that goes far beyond what the supervisors, county staff, or a consultant might be able to provide. Now the supervisors have the opportunity to create regulations that best meet the diverse needs of our community.

The Nevada Irrigation District may be learning a similar lesson. A recent proposal to implement live video streaming and archiving was widely supported by the community. However, due to concerns about how well the proposal would be implemented, many people urged the NID Board to take time to consult with more experienced people in the community and they agreed.

For an agency that typically tells the community what it is doing, rather than asking what the community wants, this was a huge step. Further evidence of this shift in approach was seen at the same meeting in a report by district staff on managing vegetation in NID canals. Built into the staff's plan was a proposal to set up a community advisory group.

I applaud NID for taking these extra steps to engage the public.

The elephant in the room, of course, is Centennial Dam. NID announced its plans to build Centennial over a year ago and has been moving forward with those plans ever since. However, opportunities to provide public input are severely limited, primarily to comments at board meetings and to comments in the federal and state environmental review processes.

On a project of this size, the public must be allowed more opportunity to participate. The public has made significant efforts to become involved, through comments at board meetings and environmental scoping meetings — and in local media. The South Yuba River Citizens League has taken an important role in raising questions about the dam and in proposing alternatives. NID remains unmoved.

Compounding this problem is NID's lack of transparency about the dam, particularly regarding four key questions: Why build the dam? Where will the water come from? What alternatives have been considered? What will it cost to construct and finance? These questions will be addressed to some degree in responses to environmental reports.

However, NID has some of this information already and has yet to make it generally available to the public. As of the writing of this opinion, the official Centennial Reservoir website has no substantive data, but is instead simply public relations puffery.

What I suggest is this: NID should stop moving forward on Centennial Dam and do what a public agency should do for any significant project — actively engage the public. If there is a need for additional water storage, then NID should come to the public and explain that need clearly and justified by good data. If this need can be justified, then NID should work with the public to explore how to meet that need.

Due to expense and the damage it would wreak, a dam should be the last alternative considered. Before choosing to build a dam, NID should answer, in cooperation with the public, a very simple question: If building Centennial Dam were not an option, what would NID do to solve the problem that it perceives?

Asking the public to help answer this question, rather than telling the public it will build the dam regardless of their concerns, would tap into the rich knowledge base within our community.

Given the many ideas the public has come up with already, it is very conceivable that Centennial Dam is unnecessary.

Bob Branstrom lives in Grass Valley.