

MCFB Letter to the Editor in Ukiah Daily Journal-Sunday November 15, 2009

Part of the responsibility of living in a democracy is the willingness to ask questions of our elected officials, especially if we are concerned with the direction we are preceding and the facts surrounding the decisions leading to that course of action are obscure. Mendocino County Farm Bureau has been attempting to get information on the county debt and un-funded liabilities for months to no avail.

After meeting with numerous county officials resulting in more questions than answers, Mendocino County Farm Bureau decided to write CEO Tom Mitchell, a letter with specific questions in hopes to better understand the Mendocino County budget situation. The questions seemed to be fairly specific and straight forward, the type of information any manager should easily be able to compile. For example: is there currently a clear plan to encourage increased revenue generating activity (new business) within Mendocino County? What is the current unfunded liability for the pension plan based both on the Actuarial and Market Value of Pension Fund Assets, not including the pension obligation bonds? What is the Total Debt of the county and how much of our approximate discretionary budget will go toward serving the principle and also the interest on this debt?

Now two months later we are still waiting for a reply. We did get a phone call from CEO Mitchell early in October, saying the response letter was ready and would be sent following review by Supervisor Smith. Mendocino County Farm Bureau sent a follow up email to thank CEO Mitchell for the update and encouraged concise specific answers to our questions. Since then, another month has passed and nothing has been seen in the form of answers.

The available county budget information is very difficult to understand, some would say purposely so. From our experience it appears that it can be very cumbersome for both the Supervisors and citizens of Mendocino County to get clear and understandable budget and financial information. This inspired another question for the CEO: Is there any current or planned program that would make this information more readily available for public review?

Mendocino County Farm Bureau feels in light of the smoke and mirrors budget process the State of California is involved with and the historic level of deficit spending by the federal government, it should come as no surprise that our membership is concerned with our own local budget and debt situation. At our meetings with county officials we heard about numerous obstacles that stand in the way of controlling the current debt situation in Mendocino County. We are convinced that fiscal responsibility needs to be a cornerstone of county government and needed changes must take place sooner rather than later.

Without answers to what seem like rather simple questions, as well as, a very confusing system for dispensing budget and debt information, it makes it very difficult for the general public yet alone our Supervisors to make rational and informed decisions. It should not take two months for our county government to respond to simple yet important questions of this nature!