VOICES

Letters and Commentary from the Central Coast and beyond

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VIEWPOINT

Separating fact from fiction in Los Osos

BY PAAVO OGREN

Assembly Bill 2701, sponsored by Assemblyman Sam Blakeslee, was signed by Gov. Schwarzenegger on Sept. 20, 2006, after approval of the California Senate and Assembly on combined votes of 111-0. In his signing message, Gov. Schwarzenegger stated that "the transfer of responsibility ... from the Los Osos Community Services District to the County is the only viable solution to addressing this problem."

Is the governor's message fact or fiction?

As the recently appointed project director, the governor's message, at a minimum, illuminates to me the unprecedented challenge facing the county of San Luis Obispo and the county Public Works Department. It is a challenge we take seriously and one that we believe requires a new approach.

The challenge is also one that we share with the community. It is a challenge of property owners, of residents and of business owners. It is about community infrastructure and about controversies associated with impacts from septic tanks and the applicability of federal and state policies, laws and regulations whose genesis dates to the Clean Water Act of 1972.

While initiating detailed efforts over the past couple of weeks on project research and planning, I was quickly reminded by recent public comments that sorting through the facts, and dispelling fiction, might inevitably be our greatest challenge. I am confident in people and democratic systems. Success of people in democratic cultures depends on education. The ability of individuals to rely on public information requires credibility and confidence so that those individuals can sort through the fact and fiction presented to them.

The county's approach is not about "telling" the community what is best for them, or professing what the community "must" do. Instead, the county's approach is about public education and providing options. We will objectively review the existing documentation on the project, and those alternatives that can be built and permitted with relative certainty will be recommended for community consideration.

TRIBUNE PHOTO BY AARON LAMBERT

Pipes for the Los Osos sewer project sit stacked in a school yard last summer.

Recently, completion of the Lopez Seismic Dam Remediation Project with South County communities resulted in that project's award of the 2006 Outstanding Government Project of the Year by the Los Angeles Section of the American Society of Civil Engineers; a prestigious award covering a region with total combined populations of over 17 million, or about 50 percent of all of California.

The award for the Lopez project recognized the use of innovative technologies and is a statement in support of our factual ability to evaluate alternatives.

Staff of the San Luis Obispo County Public Works Department represents diverse professional talents including civil, environmental and other engineering disciplines; environmental resource specialists; water quality chemists; water and wastewater operators; and finance, accounting, administrative and computer services. Staff members directly assigned to the project have the other department staff available for formal assistance and for informal consultation. In addition, the senior departmental staff includes individuals with decades of work experience on project issues and who will be important sources of knowledge and judgment. The value of all individuals, employees and consultants who have worked in the past, or are currently working on the project, cannot be underestimated, and we intend to draw on the expertise of them all.

We appreciate the comments and questions submitted over the past couple weeks on the project Web site at www.slocounty.ca.gov /pw/lowwp.

We are reading each and every one, but we can only reply to a few at this time. Upcoming public information efforts will begin in mid-December at our initial town hall meeting. Our Web site will include technical memorandums, resource materials and question-and-answer pages.

We will provide information through the posta service. We simply request, as we proceed, that everyone listen to explanations before jumping to conclusions. The details are still where we separate fact from fiction.

Paavo Ogren is deputy director of public works for San Luis Obispo County.