

Planning for next year... and beyond

In history, there are several prevailing theories on how things work. Some believe there is a linear progression to events, and because conditions constantly change we can never go back, only forward.

But there are also cycles and things that occur in a bunch. This line of reasoning also includes what goes around, comes around, and there is nothing new under the sun.

Every once in awhile, especially when something extraordinary happens, we find out somebody else has been there, done that — we can chalk up those oddities to life's uncanny coincidences.

What happened to me on Saturday, Nov. 7, also happened to Chet Crain in 1973. Chet was a career educator in Los Angeles who retired to Three Rivers in 1969 where among the other great things he did here, he served as the district's trustee on the Tulare County Planning Commission. While serving on that venerable board (1970-1978), he became an active member of the California County Planning Commissioners Association (CCPCA).

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Our commonalities just begin there. I was appointed to the Tulare County Planning Commission four years ago and also became involved with the CCPCA. Obviously, Chet and I both realized that if you want to become an effective commissioner, the statewide organization dedicated to education and networking with others facing similar challenges is a way to decidedly lessen the commissioner learning curve.

At the annual conference in 1973, Chet was elected CCPCA president and served his one-year term in 1974. This was the first such statewide honor bestowed on the first local planning commissioner from Three Rivers.

On Nov. 7, at the 79th Annual CCPCA Conference in Sacramento, I became the second Tulare County commissioner elected CCPCA president.

Not every county has even had a president. Tulare County has had two, both from Three Rivers!

The duties of the president are to conduct the meetings, ride herd on the executive director (now a paid position), oversee the newsletter publication, and plan the next year's annual conference.

For me, to make the decision of how and where to have the 80th annual conference is a huge challenge and reminds me of some of the decisions I've participated in over the past four years. The ones I am referring to are those where neither the applicant nor the neighbors are overjoyed.

After the economy took a dive in 2008, the CCPCA has had difficulty attracting commissioners to its conferences, or even a representative or two from the majority of California's 58 counties. Following a successful conference in 2007

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when more than 100 commissioners and guests attended at South Lake Tahoe, the last two — at Bakersfield (2008) and Sacramento (2009) — attracted less than half

of the 2007 signups.

Two factors have influenced those who have attended both the conferences and board meetings. First is the unwillingness for the supervisors in some counties to support their planning commissioners in these educational endeavors.

As a result, the board and the attendees of the conferences are becoming decidedly Central District affairs. It follows that those counties are closer geographically, but more importantly, most of the Central District's supervisors are still lending their support.

Some counties are following the lead of the state legislators and cutting where they can ill-afford to cut. Collaboration on county, regional, and statewide issues is critical now more than ever.

Sending the message that planning for the future is not a priority is bad news.

Currently, counties are cutting planning staff and not filling vacancies created by attrition. The economic woes put more strain on commissioners, some of whom are not paid and don't qualify for even minimal benefits.

What this does is put even more responsibility on planning commissioners, arguably the most important appointed officials in the state. That's why with my experience in planning, I jumped at the opportunity to get involved in the CCPCA, to better represent my constituent district and help look after the future of Tulare County.

For the 2009 conference, the CCPCA had a tremendous slate of speakers. The one-day classroom session, which dealt with pervious concrete, a California Water Plan update, California trails, and then heard keynote addresses from Lauren Hammond, Sacramento's vice mayor, and Steve Wilensky, Calaveras County supervisor and vice president of the state's Sierra Nevada Conservancy, was simply over the top as these conferences go.

The speakers were engaging and there was plenty of useful information for planners, commissioners, and lessons for all those concerned about California's future.



A key to making the CCPCA statewide conference run smoothly was Embassy Suites, Sacramento, employees Jo Ann Ramirez-Banda (left), sales manager, and Barbara Stannius, director of sales and marketing.