Vacuum exists among top ranks of EDC

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County is lacking leadership. There is no permanent chief administrative officer, no permanent assistant chief administrative officer, no IT director, no risk manager, and no chief deputy county counsel.

The county for more than a year has had an interim CAO – which is the top position.

It won't be until January at the earliest that supervisors Sue Novasel and Brian Veerkamp present to their colleagues the names of firms that could be hired to find a CAO. Impeding the process today are the holidays and the fact papers have been filed to recall all five supervisors. The latter could make the pool of candidates small.

Novasel said she hopes three to five CAO candidates would be interviewed in March or April.

There has been no explanation as to why the board has been so slow to take any action until now.

Pamela Knorr, current human resources chief, had been appointed interim CAO in November 2014 after the board essentially fired Terri Daly. Knorr had the position until June, at which time the board appointed Larry Combs acting chief administrative officer.

Combs makes $92,000 a year to work 20 hours a week. In addition to this he collects $185,167.92 a year from Sutter County and a $13,689.60 from Merced County. The latter two figures are his respective pensions from having been CAO in those counties. The Sutter allocation will soon top $190,000

with cost of living adjustments.

Combs' decisions as CAO of Sutter County have the state now asking for $3.1 million because of MediCal overcharges and other unauthorized expenses, the *Appeal Democrat* newspaper reported in November. Sutter is a tiny county and that kind of hit to its budget would be similar to El Dorado County having to come up with $6 million.

Combs is also chair of the California Statewide Communities Development Authority. This group oversees the California PACE Program or Property Assessed Clean Energy. In September the supervisors agreed to implement this program. It is free except for administrative costs, which were not disclosed in the staff report. He is not paid for his work on CSCDA, so it is it not legally a conflict of interest for Combs to have recommended the county work with this group.

Instead of waiting for the Board of Supervisors to hire a CAO, Combs is looking for an assistant. Most head honchos like to pick their subordinates. This likely won't be the case in El Dorado County.

"We were hoping to be able to hire the assistant CAO when we hire a permanent CAO, but that process is just beginning," Novasel told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We feel it is better to go out for an assistant CAO now rather than wait."

Michael Ciccozzi has been on loan from the County Counsels Office to be acting CAO. That office wants him back.

"He didn't want to apply for CAO so we thought it best to get another assistant, so Larry is out looking for a good assistant," Novasel said.

Combs did not return multiple phone calls so it is not known what he is looking for in an assistant, when he hopes to have that person on board or what type of background check might be done on this future employee.

When it came to doing the background check on Combs, Novasel said the county's Human Resources Department conducted it. There was never any background check done on Knorr, though, who heads the HR Department and was fired as CAO in Alpine County.

Lack of background checks or ones without any substance are the norm in El Dorado County.

It's possible this may change. Novasel said the firm that is hired for the permanent CAO search would do the background check on people the county might hire for that position.