Opinion: Grand jury catches up with Combs

By Larry Weitzman

About six months ago I wrote a **column** about our former CAO, Larry Combs, getting he and all his Sutter cronies (including former DA Carl Adams) a 50 percent pension increase. Combs took his annual pension from about $120K to about $188K and Adams' from about $105K to about $145K. But what I didn't know is that it was done in violation of at least four Government Code statutes.

But all this was revealed in a Sutter County Grand Jury report issued May 18. First, even with opposition from the then county auditor, CPA Robert Stark, who was a pension analyst with California for 10 years prior to becoming Sutter County auditor, this pension increase was rammed through by Combs via the consent calendar, which violates proper procedure of an open hearing for such matters.



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During what little discussion there was, Combs said it would cost the county about $11 million. Stark said it would be at least double. According to grand jury records, unfunded liabilities went from about $11 million in 2003, the year before, to a 2014 level of $111 million in 10 years. Combs looks to have told a whopper.

Before any pension increases are allowed, there are four specific Government Code sections that need to be complied with which are 7507, 23026, 31515.5 and 31516, the nuts and bolts of which provide that the county shall provide an actuarial statement on future costs (sec. 7507). That was not provided by an actuarial. Second, it must be provided and posted two weeks before a scheduled open public hearing for any change in pensions (7507).

The other sections also provide notice procedures by the Board of Supervisors and time requirements plus an analysis of the pension changes and explanation of the of the financial impact that the proposed benefit changes will have on the funding status of the county employees' retirement. There are more but absolutely none of the Government Code sections were complied with. Combs intentional violated the code sections

In fact, CAO Larry Combs pushed through the increase in retirement benefits of which the biggest benefactor was Larry Combs, with DA Carl Adams not far behind. The unfunded pension liability has increased by tenfold. There are serious financial problems for Sutter County caused by Combs' greed and it's all in a 2015-16 five-page Sutter County Grand Jury report.

Combs quits Sutter in 2009 and went to Merced County where he didn't last two years as he tried to take over as their CAO. It didn't happen, however. An example of which could be summarized by an exchange in 2010 reported by the Modesto Bee. Merced County 4th District Supervisor Deidre Kelsey at a board meeting asked for a performance review of Combs, saying with respect to Combs that his actions "brings into question who works for whom in Merced County." It was a stern four-minute lecture about "poor communications, a lack of budgetary information and the creation of new policies outside of negotiations with the county's union." Sound familiar?

Kelsey went on in the Bee, "What has happened to the board

setting such policy decisions as our health care plan? … When did this board make a decision regarding superagencies? Apparently there is someone out there discussing combining departments into a super agencies and this Board has never had an agendized discussion regarding this matter," she continued. "Again, I ask, who is sailing this ship?"

Combs had signed a four-year contract at a salary of $205K with a six-month buy-out clause. The BOS couldn't take him any more after about another year and bought him out. And this is only scratching the surface about Combs. He controlled Sutter with an iron fist until they threw him out. Merced saw the light quickly as what he did in Sutter.

So how did we end up with Combs with respect to his track record being all over the Internet? You can thank HR Director Pam Knorr, who highly recommended Combs to the board with individual meetings. A few months ago I asked 3rd District Supervisor Brian Veerkamp was there a proper and thorough background check done on Combs. He assured me there was. If there were a background, it was at best cursory. And that's how we ended up with Combs. Thank you Pam Knorr. If we had a real HR director, Combs would never had happened.

And what happened in Sutter County? Combs got his buddy the DA to file bogus charges against the auditor who protested his pension scheme. After Stark, the auditor, spent over $400K of his own money the case was dismissed. Combs spent more in the prosecution, including misappropriation of about $100K of anti-drug task force funds. Now he collects pensions totaling almost $220K and skates free. He should be living in the graybar hotel. One other question. Why does Knorr still have a job in EDC.

At least we have Don Ashton to put it all back together. It's a heavy load.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.