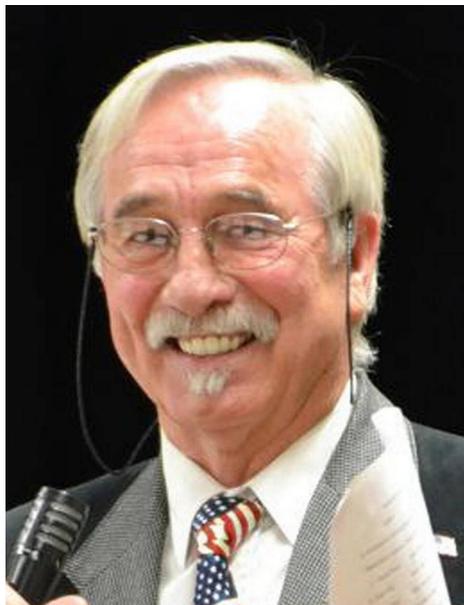


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# Looking back and ahead



BY TOM WHEELER

*Madera County District 5 Supervisor*

2016 has proven to be another busy year - a year full of both challenges and opportunities, and as always your Madera County Board of Supervisors has continued to make the difficult decisions that will best support our way of life today and into the future.

One of our most pressing concerns this year has been efforts around tree mortality hazards and public safety. I continue to play an active role on the Governor's Tree Mortality Task Force where we discuss and research opportunities around homeowners insurance, wood market utilization, current and future forest management practices and a number of other imperative issues.

While we have not seen as many resources as we would like for private landowners, the Natural Resource Conservation Services again opened their incentive program to take on part of the financial burden for qualified applicants. In the last round they funded over \$600,000 for landowner support and I think we will be looking at similar numbers this time around.

Other successes include a \$500,000 grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy for forest restoration, and an approximately \$700,000 award from the State Responsibility Area (SRA) fees that we all pay to assist at-risk communities in Eastern Madera County.

On another note, we have completed the new sheriff's facility, are currently constructing our new morgue facility, and renovating our probation boot camp facility. We are in the initial planning phases for a new Health & Social Services building, Probation and District Attorney's Office, and a new Agriculture Department facility.

Our goal is to consolidate departments, making it easier for constituents to have one-stop services while also updating out-of-date infrastructure. Many of these ventures include creative finance techniques such as lease-to-own options and state funding support while also benefiting from low interest rates due to the county's current A+ credit rating.

Other exciting wins include the momentum around SPCA efforts in Eastern Madera County which currently results in a no-kill shelter, Caltrans efforts to complete additional passing lanes on Highway 41, the groundbreaking of a community-scale biomass facility at the old mill site in North Fork, and the new homeless shelter for veterans in Oakhurst. I continue to support as many community-based initiatives as possible and push state and federal agencies in order to get our piece of the pie.

As I mentioned, we have had to make some difficult decisions this year including trash disposal rates, the Austin Quarry, new subdivisions, and exploratory efforts for an off-highway vehicle park (OHV). First off, I would like to sincerely thank each and every one of you who contacted me and/or staff to provide input for these difficult choices.

Secondly, I would like to briefly share some details regarding each of these complicated projects. For starters, while I am not a fan of increasing rates at the dump we are currently \$1.2 million in the red. Therefore the decision came down to increasing rates for all payers, or eliminating trash service in Eastern Madera County altogether.

In regards to the rock quarry we have to remember that anyone could come and purchase that land and use it for whatever they would like, such as orchards, and we would have no say so on how they manage that land. Ultimately, after much contemplation I decided that having a committed 100-year project that we could monitor for water use, air quality and environmental concerns while also giving local access to much-needed aggregate and updates to our highway system was the best decision.

Finally, the exploratory efforts associated with the OHV park are finally, after nearly 10 years of requests and land searches, gaining some momentum, but like many projects before, only by going through this process will we see if the property we are currently looking at is appropriate.

In 2017 we can expect to see some new and exciting things while also keeping some of the tactics that are working well.

For starters, I am excited to see the completion of a new Madera County sign on Highway 41 that highlights our logging culture while using state of the art solar. Additionally, I will continue to host my regular tour of town hall meetings across Eastern Madera County and as always will consider special town halls as appropriate.

We will be diving into our third year of what started as an experiment in the quarterly Inter-agency Community Collaborative meetings, that continue to bridge the gap between county-community coordination in regards to youth needs and efforts. We are looking forward to seeing what improvements the Boys & Girls Club will make in 2017 as well.

With that I would like to again thank you for your involvement, support, direction and interest in our community. We live in a very special place because of people like you and I am once again humbled to represent you.

As always, please do not hesitate to reach out to me if I can be of any assistance.