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RCD straight talk

Bud Hoekstra Guest Opinion May 30, 2016

Coke? Pepsi? A resource conservation district? Not every one of us remembers the bygone days of the 1950s when a customer could walk into a five-and-dime, sit at the deli counter and hear a waitress sing out “Coke or Pepsi?” Customers back then had choices.

America boasted of being a free society with a free market and, in keeping with our notion of freedom, was choice. We had choices! Today the venerated choice is gone: restaurants serve either a Coke or a Pepsi, no choice at the fountain like the good-old days of yore!

Resource conservation districts hark back to that era of venerated choice. After the 1930s Dust Bowl, Congress enacted legislation that allowed the formation of conservation districts and each state had a choice on how to do its districts. California was no exception to the mindset of the day, and when we passed laws, we preserved choice. Choice was the politically correct thing to do and we did it. California gave the electorate of each county a choice to vote yea or nay on an RCD – a resource conservation district for the county.

Decades ago Calaveras voters were given the choice of granting or rejecting an RCD. By George, Calaveras rejected it! Why? A nefarious and untrue rumor spread throughout the county that voting yes for an RCD meant taxes and voters didn’t want taxes, so they voted the RCD down. This June, voters again get a crack at an RCD, since the measure is on the June ballot. But there are no taxes associated with an RCD. There are no hidden taxes. Voters merely go through the ritual of choice and choice is not efficient business. Markets economize. That’s why the local watering holes offer Coke or Pepsi, not both.

Yes, it is true that voters in other counties of California voted in taxes for their RCDs, Los Angeles County, for example. But voters in most of California’s counties were not so generous. The money to run RCDs comes from the federal government. That money will go to county A or to county B, wherever the feds wish to dole it. The money can’t come to Calaveras. We have no RCD.

What do RCDs do? RCDs are the middlemen that direct federal and state funds to worthy projects of land stewardship. RCDs typically fund fire prevention projects and pay for fire prevention education. RCDs afford technical assistance to ranchers and farmers and RCDs sponsor ranch cleanups, grower workshops, watershed projects and water conservation and more too drroll to list. RCD dollars maintain water treatment plants, waste treatment plants and other compliance infrastructures. Water is important because we live in a dry state. I don't mean Coke, Pepsi, RC or beer when I say "dry."

Let's be perfectly transparent about what RCDs do for the counties in which they operate. To illustrate, I've chosen Mariposa County, the mother of all counties from which Calaveras County was carved. The Mariposa County RCD ran a program through CalRecycle to clean up trash dumped on ranches. Partnering with the Sierra-Nevada Conservancy, the same RCD set up a demonstration garden using water-wise native plants. Also, the RCD established the Upper Merced River Watershed Council and with it rebuilt and restored the Briceburg Visitor Center at the entrance to three Bureau of Land Management campgrounds along the river. The RCD in Mariposa paid for the "Welcome to the Foothills" brochure developed by the chamber of commerce and the Sierra-Nevada Conservancy. This RCD also took on the new Mariposa Grading ordinance and provided the technical wherewithal to curb erosion. This same RCD funded and supported the Mariposa Firesafe Council, helped to compile the county's soil survey and took on projects like mapping yellow star thistle for eradication and control.

Oddly, we use other county RCDs as our crutch. We mooch off RCDs in Amador, Tuolumne and San Joaquin counties. In fact, Amador claims to be the true Calaveras RCD since it funds East Bay Municipal Utility District projects that lie in both counties.

Tuolumne's RCD stepped in and found money to improve Murphys' waste treatment plant that lacked the \$80,000 that ratepayers couldn't pay.

The June ballot throws the red carpet of choice once again before the voters. We have that relic of choice like a 1950s five-and-dime, that old hallmark of a free market. Markets become efficient, but politics constipates, because the past rules the present. How many menus list both Coke and Pepsi, offering choice? Come June, we will vote on an RCD, going through the ritualistic motions of choice. We won't vote on driverless cars; we won't vote on drones; we won't even vote in pot regulations. The truth is that if the Red Cross were a product of the era, we'd vote on having a Red Cross. The past rules the present: so we have choice. Had our lawmakers ordained it, we'd vote on bulk chewing gum or chewing gum with wrappers. Just think of all the wasted tax dollars it took to get this ritual of choice on the June ballot! Holy smokes!

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