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Acronyms' Creep Into Gov-Speak Draws FLAK

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Think SWAT is what you do to a fly, COLA is something you drink and LAFCO's a comedy club?

To the uninitiated, government-speak can sound like a secret language — and not one a sensible person would willingly decode.

It's gotten so bad, a Contra Costa County supervisor last month got his counterparts to ban acronyms and abbreviations in written reports to the Board of Supervisors. A cheat sheet of 83 frequently used acronyms and abbreviations now is attached to each board agenda.

"At meetings, we tend to throw these terms around, like JSPAC," said Supervisor John Gioia (pronouncing it jazz pack). "No one in their right mind is going to know what that means." (It means Juvenile Systems Planning Advisory Committee).

Taking it a step further, though, Gioia got the Board of Supervisors and department managers to agree to pay a \$1 fine each time they slipped into acro-lingo during boardroom conversation. Dollars are collected in a jar and distributed to charities.

In their first test, supervisors and managers had to cough up \$12, Gioia said.

The jargon-buster himself slipped, blurring out "EMS," or emergency medical services, during debate over an ambulance contract.

"We're all guilty to some degree of overusing acronyms," Gioia said. "But politicians and bureaucrats are the worst."

Now some are wondering whether this burst of Bay Area clarity can spread. Contra Costa is thought to be the only California county to have adopted such a policy.

There is no known equivalent effort in state government. However, a lot of state agencies, including the Employment Development Department (EDD to insiders) publish helpful glossaries of little-known terms.

Internet-savvy anti-acronym activists have vented their own frustration by posting ever-growing lists of alphabet soup. Both real and fictitious, the listings include AAAAAA, the American Assn. Against Acronym Abuse.

"It's a shorthand," said Toni Young, president of the Southern California Assn. of Governments, whose 76-member council represents dozens of local governments across six Southern California counties.

"If you say 'Southern California Association of Governments' every time you want to say SCAG, you are going to be driven crazy. People will stop saying anything at all."

Still, Young, who's also a Port Hueneme councilwoman, recalls the day she busted right through the gov-speak meter:

"I said, 'The EEC and the TCC are having a joint meeting on the PEIR and the RTP,' " she said. "A moment later I thought, 'Did you really say that, Toni?' "

Since then, she's toned down the abbreviations, Young said.

Hasan Ikhata, SCAG's planning and policy director, pointed out that governments resist change. Switching to agendas that spell out every term could prove costly, he added.

"The problem is that most names involve 10 words, and long ones at that," Ikhata said.

"Professionally, if you are given five minutes to make your point, you would have a hard time if you didn't use acronyms," he said.

Ikhata conceded, however, that even he occasionally gets confused by the lingo at SCAG meetings.

"I'm actually glad someone is trying to tackle it," he said.

Ventura County Supervisor John Flynn said he wishes he had thought up the no-acronyms policy for his own board. A 32-year board veteran, Flynn has seen a lot of acronymic lingo go in and out of fashion.

"We really should have the same language as the people that we serve," Flynn said. "The public doesn't really know all of the things that their money is being spent on because of it. It's not done deliberately. But it's confusing."

Gioia was an attorney used to parsing the English language when he entered public service a decade ago.

"I was on a water district board that was called East Bay MUD," he said. "Talk about an unfortunate acronym."

Gioia said he heard regularly from citizens who ventured into the supervisors' hearing room only to realize they didn't know what was going on, or in what language. But he conceded he borrowed the no-acronyms idea from commissioners for Kitsap County, near Seattle. Their board instituted the policy last year and it has been working well, he said.

"More than anything, it makes us more aware of how we use these acronyms," he said. "Every profession has its own terms of art. But government is supposed to be an open and easy-to-follow process."

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Slipping under the RADAR

For the uninitiated, here is a cheat sheet for government shorthand, followed by a few expressions that have become classics.

Common government acronyms and abbreviations

EIR: Environmental impact report, required for many development projects.

RFP: Request for proposal, means "send us your contract bids."

SWAT: Special Weapons and Tactics team, police officers trained to respond to difficult standoffs. If you live in Contra Costa County, however, it could also mean Southwest Area Transportation Committee.

COLA: Cost of living adjustment.

LAFCO: Local Agency Formation Commission, makes decisions on land annexation. Each California county has one.

CEQA: California Environmental Quality Act, the landmark law that mandates EIRs (see above) for certain building projects.

FTE: Full-time equivalent. In government, workers are not really employees but the equivalents of employees.

Some classics

CREEP: Committee to Re-Elect the President, President Nixon's reelection committee.

FLAK: German for *flieger abwehr kanone*, or anti-aircraft gun. Now used as jargon for clamorous criticism.

RADAR: Radio detecting and ranging.

SCUBA: Self-contained underwater breathing apparatus.

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