

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

Supervisors to pay a \$1 fine for using bureaucratic lingo

- Erin Hallissy, Chronicle Staff Writer
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Supervisor John Gioia said his proposal was inspired Kitsap County, Wash. Chronicle photo, 2004, by Lance Iversen

Contra Costa County supervisors who use certain dirty words during weekly meetings will have to cough up \$1 fines, but the newly banned utterances aren't the seven infamous ones forbidden on public airwaves.

Instead, under a new policy unanimously adopted Tuesday, bureaucratic acronyms like EIR, LAFCO, ABAG and RFP will be verboten in the board chambers in Martinez, not just from the supervisors' podium but also in all written materials for board meetings.

"We throw them around all the time," said Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond, who proposed making Contra Costa the first county in California to adopt the anti-acronym stand. Politicians and bureaucrats there now must use phrases instead -- environmental impact report, the Local Agency Formation Commission, the Association of Bay Area Governments and Request for Proposals.

While his colleagues quipped and giggled about having to pay \$1 for saying MTC instead of Metropolitan Transportation Commission, Gioia acknowledged that some people might make light of having to pay a fine for using a snappy acronym.

But he asserted that the public, whether sitting in the chambers or watching on television, can be confused when government officials engage in alphabet-soup discussions of programs.

"It really is a meaningful and serious issue," Gioia said, ultimately persuading supervisors to follow his lead.

Gioia said he was inspired by the board of commissioners in Kitsap County, Wash. Earlier this year, it banned acronyms at meetings and assessed a \$1 fine to violators. Chairwoman Chris Endresen said Tuesday that the county had raised about \$150 in fines, which go to charity. "We did it as a fun thing, but it's a serious issue," Endresen said. "I think it's important for government officials to speak in English."

Gioia, who also plans to have any fines collected sent to charity, agreed.

"It really is about making government more understandable and user- friendly and transparent," he said. "When people can't understand what you're talking about, they can't feel involved."

Gioia said he was not talking about commonly used acronyms such as FYI, FBI or CIA, but arcane governmental ones like Contra Costa's JSPAC, the Juvenile Systems Planning Advisory Committee, which is pronounced "jazz pack."

"Some people may think that's a political action committee for jazz music, " Gioia joked during the meeting.

County officials agreed to list on board agendas or post in the chambers common acronyms that will be allowed without fine.

Gioia said he'd chip \$10 into the fine jar if supervisors could get through a meeting without using an acronym. Endresen said she hadn't had to pay out on a similar pledge she made when her board of commissioners enacted the fine program in January.

"We haven't made it yet," she said, laughing. "The first month, we raised \$47 in about two weeks. We just throw our dollars on the table."

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