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Say what? Board set to 86 acronymic lingo

By Peter Felsenfeld CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Care for some ISO with your RFP? How about a dash of LAFCO in your ABAG?

For those unfamiliar with government lingo, discussions during public meetings can be as unintelligible as these questions. Many an eye glazes over as Contra Costa leaders bandy about such arcane abbreviations as SWAT, CSAC, JSPAC and EIR.

The bafflement is understandable: The common abbreviations hardly clear up the bureaucratic terminology they're meant to shorten. Tired of the cant, one county supervisor hopes to score a victory for plain English.

Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond plans to propose a policy this week establishing small fines, probably about \$1 per infraction, for county leaders who use abbreviations. In addition, the policy would require Contra Costa staff members to fully define abbreviations in agendas and accompanying reports.

Although the policy would carry no legal weight, Gioia said, it would serve as a light-hearted nudge to make government workings easier for the public to understand -- even without a translator. The money raised is expected to go to charity.

"As supervisors, we tend to throw around terms that we think everybody knows about," Gioia said. "But that's not the case, and it can be difficult for people to follow our discussions."

Contra Costa would be the first California county to take an official stand against obscure board talk. Gioia said he got the idea from a similar step taken this year in Kitsap County, Wash.

Commissioners in the county near Puget Sound agreed to fine themselves \$1 every time they or their department heads use abbreviations. So far, they've raised \$150 for veterans funds and the Red Cross.

"Sometimes we speak in shorthand instead of simple English, said Commissioner Chris Endresen. "And people are often embarrassed to ask what we mean."

COUNTYSPEAK

Here are some abbreviations commonly used by Contra Costa supervisors and staff members in public meetings.

ABAG, pronounced ay-bag. Stands for the Association of Bay Area Governments, a regional planning agency operated by Bay Area cities and counties. Works on issues involving land use, housing, environmental quality and economic development.

CCCERA, pronounced seh-sera. Stands for Contra Costa County Employees' Retirement Association. The association board administers \$3.3 billion in pension fund assets.

CSAC, pronounced see-sack. Stands for the California State Association of Counties, a statewide association that lobbies on behalf of counties.

EIR, each letter pronounced separately. Stands for environmental impact report, an analysis required by state law for many construction projects.

ISO, each letter pronounced separately. Stands for Industrial Safety Ordinance, a county law that gives supervisors some regulatory authority over oil refineries in unincorporated areas.

JSPAC, pronounced jazz-pack. Stands for Juvenile Systems Planning Advisory Committee. A board that advises the Board of Supervisors on juvenile justice and probation planning issues.

RFP, each letter pronounced separately. Stands for request for proposals. Public agencies send out the requests as an invitation to companies to bid on government construction and service-related jobs.

SWAT, pronounced swat. Stands for South West Area Transportation Committee, one of four subregional transportation advisory committees to the Contra Costa Transportation Authority.

-- Peter Felsenfeld