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Federal Glover: Lack of leadership in Sacramento impacts county

By Federal Glover

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PEOPLE ARE STARTING to notice the impacts caused by the state's budget quagmire. Like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pond, Sacramento's inability to pass a budget is affecting all segments of our community.

Checks for various kinds of aid are sometimes delayed, causing late payments for rent and other bills. County case workers are so overwhelmed for aid requests that they can't respond quick enough. Depending on what day you call, county and city offices may be closed.

Foundations that give grants to nonprofit agencies are seeing their pots dwindle, and in turn those agencies that help people cope with these trying times see more and more people knock on their doors. Schools are dropping the small class mandates instituted just a few years ago, stacking 30-40 students per classroom.

After school sports are in danger of disappearing or being forced to charge students fees to play on school teams. Summer school, where students usually make up work or try to get extra tutoring, is not happening in some school districts.

And the list goes on.

The full impact of those cutbacks in services and programs has not slammed down on us yet. Contra Costa County workers scramble to find other

sources of money to maintain some of the county's services. Most of the service providers are operating on last year's leftovers or emergency reserves. When those funds dry up, things will really start to get painful.

We expect the complaints to reach critical proportions when potholes don't get filled, levees are not maintained, creeks overflow, library hours are cut, and health permits issued to new restaurants take months to get issued.

We know we face major funding problems in our county, and for the past several years the Board of Supervisors has been seeking ways to lessen the certain pain. Only now are other counties undergoing the same process we've been going through.

However, a major portion of our financial problem is out of our control. If the state ultimately decides to take our gas tax money, cut back on education or withhold funding for federal- and state-mandated social services, the county and cities like Antioch, Brentwood, Oakley and Pittsburg will be up the creek.

The reserves cities and the county are required to have will only keep us afloat for so long. No one is certain what will happen if this recession lasts more than two or three years.

Some people still cling to the belief that the Obama administration will throw a lifeline to California. Those who believe this think there is no way the United States can afford to let California go under. The seventh-largest economy in the world, California represents a 12th of the U.S. economy.

"A fiscal meltdown by California or any other large state or municipality would surely destabilize the U. S., if not worldwide, financial markets," wrote State

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Treasurer Bill Lockyer to U.S. Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner, President Obama's point man in guiding the nation out of this recession.

President Obama and his administration have repeatedly said California has some serious fundamental problems that it needs to fix.

If the United States bails out the state from the logjam caused by the political gamesmanship being played out in Sacramento, the Feds could impose conditions — just as they did with the auto and banking industries — that might be so onerous as to dissuade more states from asking for federal aid. However, our state legislators would be in no position to refuse those conditions.

The economy continues to spiral downward. Fitch Rating has lowered California's bond rating from an A minus to a BBB. That is the lowest bond rating for any state (just above junk bonds) and will make further borrowing for infrastructure and services even more expensive.

There is a conclave this weekend where members of the California State Association of Counties (CSAC), in which I represent Contra Costa, will be meeting with our city and school board partners at the Local Government Summit on State Governance and Fiscal Reform in Sacramento.

The Cities Counties Schools (CCS) Partnership combines the efforts of CSAC, the League of California Cities and the California School Boards Association.

The summit, titled "Rebuilding California — From the Ground Up," is an effort to hash out in detail the changes the state needs to make to restore effective governance and a sensible fiscal system.

The possible reform topics will run the gamut —

from changing the initiative process to modifying the mandated allocations, restoring the rule of local control, to broadly realigning revenue authority.

Counties have seen firsthand how the state's dysfunctional system dramatically affects services and constituents. It's clear the current state-local relationship is not working and needs to be changed.

Let's hope these organizations will be able to push the state's leadership toward the implementation of serious reform. Reform could take the form of the initiative process, legislation, or a Constitutional Convention. It is a conversation we need to start right away.

Glover is the District V county supervisor.
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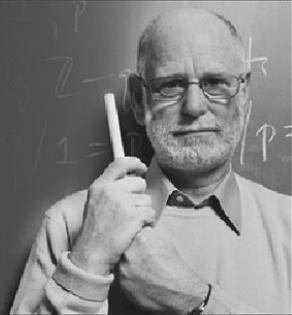
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