

Observations "Past and Present" from Mayor Duane Picanco

Where are we headed in 2012?

By Millie Drum

Considering the swath of the wide brush that paints a bleak picture of our global, national and statewide economy, Paso Robles is moving through and enduring many tough challenges better than most communities.

"I think our local economy is leveling off, even with the pockets of ups and downs periodically," said Mayor Duane Picanco. I asked our mayor if he thought the general public is fully aware of the scope of our local manufacturing industry and its huge impact on employment and generation of revenue. He replied, "I don't think so. Many of the largest companies are low profile, showing community support through the Chamber of Commerce and other organizations. In all the years I've been on the city council and currently as mayor, I visit our manufacturing companies that employ thousands of people. In fact, many of the companies are hiring; up to 40 people in one company. TJ Maxx is ready to go in the Lowe's center. The Mid-State Fair has put us on the map and it goes far beyond that with the Paso Robles Event Center attracting thousands of visitors from throughout the United States resulting in millions of dollars in revenue."

However, the recent decision by state government regarding the allocation of local redevelopment money makes 2012 a whole new



ball game. Mayor Picanco knows all too well how "one call" can change the direction of the game, years of enforcing the rules of the game as a softball umpire brings credibility to a decision, whether or not it is popular with the players or spectators.

Our conversation one year ago had a prophetic message considering the latest news. Last year, Mayor Picanco stated, "When the state takes money from us, it's out of our control. Even when and if they give it back, there are strings attached. And it wasn't their money to begin with. I understand that in today's economy, our citizens are concerned about their own survival, but we must voice our opposition to the state legislators who are making the decisions without considering all of the critical choices that the city, county and community service districts are facing. The next couple of years won't be pleasant, but I've always been up front and honest with our residents."

From 1987 to well into the 90's, downtown Paso Robles was transformed with funds from the redevelopment agency. It provided funds for city park improvements and influenced Park Cinemas to invest in a multi-plex theater; two factors that contributed to the revitalization of downtown Paso Robles. Within the past several months, there's been dedicated effort to finally begin work on important projects in the downtown and City Park that have been in the discussion and planning stages for

many years; specifically handicapped parking, curb changes and a renovated restroom facility. Approximately \$2.2 million in mandatory disabled access improvements throughout the downtown area were originally funded with redevelopment money. Since the work has begun in good faith based on redevelopment funding, general fund reserves may need to be used to fund the projects instead.

As far as the city's infrastructure, Picanco states, "The condition of our streets and roads has come to an embarrassing point, but as I've always said, 'There's nothing we can't do if we had the money to do it.' The council may at least be discussing some kind of sales tax increase, but I'm unsure about any action going forward if the state comes through with a sales tax too. If we do go forward, we must identify where the money will be spent. When the public sees that we're spending money and it's not being spent on streets and roads, I can understand that the community doesn't relate. But it's fees and grants that are allocated for a specific purpose."

The support from the citizens and thousands of visitors is helping to pave the road to recovery for Paso Robles. Picanco adds, "I hear compliments constantly, not only from residents, but from our visitors as well. People say 'Thank you. Paso is such a great town.' I thank them and if they're visiting, I always invite them back."

"I also believe that the mayor should be accessible to the community. If I'm not accessible, I don't have the pulse of the com-

munity and know what people are thinking. For me personally, it has helped. Sometimes, I need to explain the reasoning behind a council decision. Other times, I listen; acknowledge the individual's comment and say, 'That's a good thought! I'll give it some consideration.'

Fortunately since my retirement, I have the time to reach out, attend events and meetings in the rural areas and neighboring cities. I'm also thankful for the interaction between myself and our District Supervisor, Frank Mecham."

Volunteers are the heart and soul of our community. In good times and bad, the people of Paso Robles step up. And as a volunteer himself, Duane says, "I also point out that we could not provide the services in today's economy if it wasn't for volunteers. I can't tell you how much I truly appreciate them, especially the youth organizations. In fact, the most recent one is PASO, a grass roots organization that has taken over the adult softball program at Barney Schwartz Park. For soccer, AYSO is another great group that raises money and provides activities for the families."

While Mayor Picanco is always mindful about the pessimism in our society that filters down to the community level, he's confident in the character of Paso Robles. The city is going forward with the projects that will help to ease the perception that little can be done to make progress. Hundreds of volunteers have stepped up to create the programs that will benefit the community and fill in the blanks that, unfortunately, the city has been unable to fill. After all, he adds, "Paso Robles as a whole is a very generous, optimistic community."

The First District: Supervisor Frank Mecham looks ahead:

The state of the economy and North County growth are on top of Frank Mecham's desktop stack, as San Luis Obispo County tackles everything from budgets and entitlements in 2012.

By Bruce M. Curtis

Accessibility is a big deal to Mecham, not the ramp-and-wheel-chair kind, the personal contact type. The 1st District county supervisor says he's even changing his North County office hours to include a second day a week, now Thursday and Friday. When Mecham served as Paso Robles mayor, lack of County information was a pet peeve. Now it's a top priority, he says.

"Twice a year I'll have community meetings, going community by

community."

2011 saw redistricting slice a piece off Mecham's turf, adding it to Jim Patterson's 5th district.

Board members weren't thrilled, but since the constitution requires districts to be redrawn every decade to ensure equal representation, there was little supervisors could do. Mecham and 4th district member Paul Teixeira first agreed to the new boundaries, but in late October, both changed their votes, opposing the new boundaries. Chairman Adam

Hill, expressed disappointment in the about-face, but he and two other members voted

to approve the new districts anyway. Mecham expects to spend more time with Patterson, now that the two each share a piece of Templeton, though he hesitates to mention his colleague by name.

"I will continue to work with him on things like the urban reserve line. My goal is to push to see some type of improvement of



the Main Street corridor; looking towards 101, we want to get something accomplished there."

Although redevelopment for Templeton, San Miguel and Shandon are goals, the county faces possibly losing state and federal redevelopment grant funding, as long as the economy remains mired. But Mecham isn't waiting around to find out.

"For the San Miguel community plan we're looking at grant applications for several projects, a community park, and continue those. On Main Street, a grant for some kind of nice gateway coming into town from the North, and also coming in from the South."

The environmental study (EIR) being done as part of updating Shandon's community plan, is almost complete, says Mecham. A jurisdiction change should help streamline development. As the economy recovers and developers want to build homes and businesses, a clear plan will be in place, Mecham explains.

"We got the conversion for Center Street, which used to be Hwy 41, changed over to the county, with the Hwy 41 to Hwy 46 area turned over to the state. Now it's less onerous to get anything done because it's no longer a state highway, making easier for things like downtown improvement, sidewalks, etc."

Out at the lakes, there's a brewing environmental crisis. Zebra Mussels have migrated from the Balkans, hitch-hiking in ship ballast water to the Great Lakes, now slowly spreading lake-by-lake through the west. Free-swimming larvae, attach themselves to trailer-borne pleasure boats, colonizing swimming crayfish and turtles, threatening lakes and rivers.

"I'm still working with my counterpart from the County of Monterey and Assemblyman Katcho Achadjian to address the Zebra Mussel issue, working with the folks up there."

Mecham has also successfully fought to get a permanent post office out at Heritage Ranch.

Pulling together a major planning strategy for handling expected future growth north of Paso Robles is a long-term project that Mecham put into motion in mid December.

"We just kicked off JLUS, the Joint Land Use Study for San Miguel Ranch and around Camp Roberts," which Mecham says will result in a coherent, predictable plan to help developers in the area. He plans to involve elected officials and a technical committee on that project, this year.

It is no great secret that state and county budgets and pension will occupy much of the board's sweat and energy this year.

Mecham touts successful pension reform negotiations he says saved San Luis Obispo County \$3.5 million in 2011, but a bigger crisis may be looming, according to Mecham.

"Our big 900 lb. gorilla is realignment," explains Mecham, "the state has reallocated to local jurisdictions the cost of managing released prisoners. [In 2011] they sent us a \$2.3 million grant to accommodate the needed increase in probation and correctional officers, as well as sheriff's department staff. That took care of it last year, but this year the cost will be \$4.3 million, and there is no guarantee the State will fund it."

Mecham says the governor plans to work with the legislature and through a ballot tax hike, but he wonders who will cover the extra criminal justice, meantime.

Speaking of realignment, Mecham also makes it abundantly clear that if the state requires entitlement programs, the state must pay for them, or they won't be available in San Luis Obispo County.

And even though the economy is recovering, California still lags the rest of the country, so Mecham says the board is well focused on jobs.

"For the first time in San Luis Obispo County, we held an economic strategy conference, we met with 125 business executives throughout

the county. We found there were five areas that do the most hiring, and from that we have learned a lot about what they see as opportunities in this County.

"First, we discovered who were the businesses. Second, we asked them 'what is in your way'. Third, we asked, 'what can we do to change it.'"

The conference produced vocal feedback. One main criticism from job producers is the lack of predictability from county planners, and the glacial rate at which county officials conduct the planning and permitting process. That will change, says Mecham.

"We now have a rapid response team that comes in. We can jump in and help a company get it done quickly."

Will Mecham himself seek reelection? The answer is a qualified yes...if he can keep the pace of a hands-on supervisor.

"I try to go and be everywhere I can, so if I'm not doing that as well and as much as I could, I'm not going to be effective."