

Why is the county ignoring its constituents?

By Darcy Ellis

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Like a lot of residents, I'm perplexed by the actions of the Inyo County Planning Commission this week. More than that, I'm outraged.

I've observed and reported on local government and its agents for the past 14 years. What I've witnessed, for the most part, is democracy in action: citizens providing guidance to their elected leaders or volunteers appointed to digest that input on the elected officials' behalf and pass it on in the form of a policy recommendation.

And for the most part, those leaders have taken the time to consider the input of their constituents in making subsequent decisions impacting those very residents' health and welfare and the lands where they recreate or make a living, the lands whose protection is vital to the preservation of local culture and the health of our tourism-based economy.

But not at the county level.

I've seen elected officials ignore the desire and requests of entire factions of their constituents – rooms full of residents pleading with their leaders to vote one way for the sake of A, B or C only to be challenged by their trusted public servants with hostile questions and eventually paid lip service prior to a vote that sides with a self-serving minority, an invisible majority or, even worse, a staff report or the direction of the county CAO.

I'm talking specifically about the Inyo County Board of Supervisors, of course. And I get that just because, say, 10 people ask the board to do one thing and 5 people ask the board to do something else that the board is not obligated to follow the directions of the 10 residents.

But let's be clear: we elected these individuals to listen and hear our concerns and THEN act accordingly. We expect them to weigh the views of each of those 15 residents in that board room BEFORE ren-

dering a decision that impacts their health, welfare and livelihoods – not take the permanent position of "Sorry, But Board Knows Best."

Too often, it is obvious the supervisors have made their decisions well in advance of their meetings. And they vote that way regardless of what is said or comes to light at the meeting, despite what they hear from the people who put them in office – residents who have done their research and taken the time to make the drive to Independence during working hours to plead (plead!) with their elected officials to do the right thing.

Discussions conclude with the supervisors offering long monologues in justification for zigging when the public has begged (begged!) them to zag.

Take the supervisors' recent discussions on LADWP's proposed solar ranch across from Manzanar, a project so unpopular it might as well have Dennis Rodman as its spokesperson. Kudos to Supervisor Jeff Griffiths for voting no against a term sheet that precedes Inyo County selling its ability to challenge the project in exchange for \$6 million and a \$2 million loan. But his colleagues' vote has the county poised to sign an MOU that forfeits its right to object to the solar project. The end result will be taxpayers owing LADWP \$2 million for potentially destroying 1,200 acres of valley floor, permanently compromising the integrity of a National Historic Site and doing untold damage to flood plains, vegetation, wildlife and ancient artifacts.

Again, the board made this decision over the objections of constituents who, by the way, happened to be experts in their respective fields warning about the consequences of LADWP's project.

The county's justification? LADWP doesn't need Inyo's permission anyway and challenging the solar project via lawsuit is too expensive for the county. The opportunity to join

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and pool resources with local tribes, environmental groups, the Manzanar Committee and even a major lobbying group in fighting the project went ignored, meanwhile.

Continuing a pattern of disregard for the people's will, the county recently re-introduced an amendment to the Inyo County General Plan that addresses renewable energy development. Residents literally just finished pleading (pleading!) with the supervisors to fight LADWP's industrial-scale solar project. This amendment identifies that very same spot on the valley floor as suitable for industrial-scale solar development along with 10 others from Laws to the Nevada border in Southeast Inyo. Not only that, but according to the Planning Department, the amendment was based on local residents' input and support.

Um ... what?

This amendment was previously introduced in 2010 with the public expressing concerns similar to those being expressed now. It was approved anyway but later repealed by the county because of a lawsuit by two environmental groups who found a lack of environmental impact analysis. The county reintroduced the amendment but to appease the plaintiffs included a provision for paying for project applicants' environmental work. Generous.

Meetings held on the new amendment included members of the public having a chance to place stickers next to words on poster boards in order to

rank phrases like "scenic values," "open spaces" and "economic development." Somehow this accounts for the Planning Department's contention of public support for the amendment itself – an amendment that makes it EASIER for multi-national corporations to build solar and wind farms on Inyo County's precious open spaces – effectively destroying them in the process. And hey, we'll pay for their Environmental Impact Reports, too.

Inyo County was previously willing to allow BrightSource to build a 250 megawatt industrial-scale solar project in the remote desert near Charleston View – in exchange for a hefty sum to mitigate impacts on county services. BrightSource eventually agreed to pay the county \$15 million and then pulled up stakes, abandoning the project. Could there be a method to Inyo County's madness? Surely there are less destructive and divisive ways to explore "creative budget solutions" than taking LADWP's money and churning for the next BrightSource.

With more than 70 people in attendance at Wednesday's Planning Commission, numerous residents attempted to explain just how disastrous this unpopular renewable energy General Plan amendment is. Residents submitted letters and other documents for the record and speakers covered every thing from serious flaws in the document, to the Planning Department's mischaracterization of public support, to the environmental and economic consequences of the plan's ultimate approval, to ideas on how the plan could be improved.

And then ... the commission rendered a quick decision running counter to everything expressed by the public, passing the amendment on to the board for approval. The lone no vote came from First District Supervisor candidate Bill Stol. They're so amenable when

they're running for office, aren't they?

One attendee likened it to the defense going to great lengths to present a strong and compelling case at trial and having the jury return a guilty verdict a minute later.

We really shouldn't be surprised. We've seen this lack of deliberation before. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't be outraged – especially when the health of the Owens Valley landscape is being threatened.

A commenter on an online forum said that "most" people in Inyo County support solar, and it's the job of the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors to represent the majority that cannot attend these meetings – the majority that also, apparently, doesn't feel inclined to participate in the discussion. How anyone can say "most" people support industrial-scale renewable energy development in Inyo County is questionable at best. To say that the commission and board are merely protecting these invisible and silent residents' wishes is absurd.

The renewable energy amendment goes before the Board of Supervisors on March 18.

It's time we stopped tolerating this shameful – and seemingly deliberate – disregard for the will of the people of this county, the arrogant dismissal of our ideas, suggestions, opinions and serious concerns.

Each time the supervisors decide or are told what they should do in advance, they waste constituents' time and taxpayer money, make a mockery of the democratic process and accomplish nothing but the furtherance of their own – or a third party's – agenda while staging a pitiful dog and pony show for nobody's benefit except, again, their own. More devastating, they erode the public trust in local government and all but guarantee less and less public input as time passes.

That input is our only hope in preventing what can only be viewed as a mistake – handing developers the key to some of the most treasured and scenic lands in the world, at the permanent expense of our battle-weary environment and tourist-based economy.

Mike Prather, member of the Inyo County Water Commission and decades-long advocate for environmentally sound decision-making in Inyo County, summed up the frightening big picture: "The last time such a wholesale landscape change was made was when Los Angeles came to the Owens Valley looking to take water south."

Think about that.

(Today's Top of the Morning is written by Darcy Ellis, a Bishop resident, third generation Owens Valley native and editor of The Inyo Register.)

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