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Stifle supervisors?

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Successful labor negotiations do not require muzzling Riverside County supervisors. Taxpayers have a direct financial stake in public employee contracts. So the county should be as transparent as possible about labor negotiations, and not suggest that quelling public discussion about a crucial fiscal issue is the preferable course.

The Board of Supervisors last week approved a statement outlining the county's official position on wage and pension reforms, with Supervisors Bob Buster and Jeff Stone opposed. The statement said that changes to county wages and pensions should occur through collective bargaining -- as if that were not regular county policy and practice. But the wording also said the board should refrain from "making public demands that should occur at the negotiation table."

For those unclear about the difference between a "demand" and justifiable discussion about the need to cut county costs, the agenda item offers this further explanation: "County supervisors should refrain from commenting in issues related to ongoing collective bargaining in public."

Well, now. Do those off-limits issues, for example, include the fact that labor costs play a central role in county budgeting? Riverside County faces a \$31 million shortfall in its current \$673 million discretionary budget, and the gap could grow to \$100 million by next fiscal year. And most of the discretionary spending goes for personnel -- nearly 23,000 positions in the county's 2010-11 budget -- and those costs are set by contracts with county unions.

Pension reforms are also crucial for future county budgets. The county is \$800 million short of what it needs to cover pension promises over the next three decades. The county will spend \$155 million on retirement costs this year, but that figure is on track to hit \$300 million annually by 2020. The county could save \$59 million a year just by requiring employees to cover their own share of pension contributions, which the county now pays.

Voters might wonder just why the people they elected to manage Riverside County's finances should be silent about those central fiscal issues -- especially when such concerns are hardly a secret.

The board majority said that supervisors' public comments could undermine contract talks, which should be left to the county's professional negotiators. Just why anyone would confuse supervisors' political speech with confidential negotiations was not clear.

But as Stone pointed out, that approach leaves the public discussion of the issues in the hands of the unions -- whose focus is on union goals and not the broader public interest. Whom does that benefit?

Besides, trying to control what individual supervisors say ends up with the muddy thinking on display last week: The statement tells the board not to discuss the labor issues publicly -- yet the statement is not an attempt to muzzle supervisors, according to its backers.

Rather than trying to make sense of that conflicting mess, the county should just let supervisors talk -- particularly as the board has no authority over individual speech anyway. County officials should be explaining the steps necessary to right the county's finances at every opportunity, not trying to stifle discussion of vital public issues.