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Opinion

IT'S A GRAY AREA: The way government should be

By JAMES P. GRAY

Recently I was able to meet Orange County Treasurer and Tax Collector Chriss Street and take a tour of his offices. I was genuinely impressed with what he is doing, and wanted to pass along my findings to you as an example of the way I believe government should be.

Chriss was sworn in to these positions on Dec. 5, 2006. The first time I heard of Chriss Street was when he and John Moorlach sounded the alarms about former Treasurer Bob Citron and his speculative investments. Moorlach originally ran against Citron for treasurer and lost, and then successfully ran for a seat on the Board of Supervisors. Then Street ran for Citron's former position, and won.

The Offices of the Treasurer and Tax Collector are authorized to have a total staff of 120 employees and send out about 880,000 property tax bills each year. They are also required to collect the tax money, invest it prudently, and make it available for county agencies partially to finance their budgets. In other words, this is the life blood of the county government and a big operation.

When he came on board, Street utilized a totally new management style in his new office, thereby taking a slow, impersonal and even dull office to one that is now vibrant, cost-effective, and service-oriented. He did this by turning his employees into a team, and incorporating other practical incentives into their work life.

For example, everyone is on a first-name basis, starting with Chriss himself. He also removed all of the private offices where managers and other workers were shielded from their fellow workers and installed nice, semi-private cubicles. He also updated their computers and computer programs to make accurate information more readably available. In addition, all workers have a laptop and a Blackberry, so that they can carry out some of their functions from home. And if the staff can reduce the amount of time that it takes to answer 99% of the telephone calls from their clients (which is the public) down below 7 seconds, everyone can enjoy casual clothing days at work.

Have his efforts been successful? Here is the good part. Secured tax collection, which is revenue that is secured by deeds of trust on real property, has increased by \$317 million, and unsecured revenue for this year increased by \$6.3 million and for the past year by \$3.6 million. All of that has allowed an additional \$161 million to be allocated to the county's schools, and an additional \$37.6 million to various county agencies. By comparison, Orange County now has a 96.5% property tax collection rate, compared to 92% for San Bernardino and 91% for Riverside Counties.

Additional good news is that between fiscal years 2006/2007 and 2008/2009, his office has actually returned \$4 million of its own budget back to the county. Name me any other governmental agency anywhere that has done anything close to that. And even though he is allotted 120 workers, without firing anybody, Chriss' offices now only employ 92 workers.

And has his staff been able to wear casual clothing to work? Recently yes, almost all of the time, because

the telephone wait time that averaged 50 seconds in fiscal year 2005/2006 was reduced to 7 seconds in fiscal year 2007/2008.

By the way, since the phones are answered more efficiently and the callers' questions responded to more accurately, the number of calls has been reduced. This means that the staff required to answer those calls has accordingly been reduced from 29 to about 16.

During the time Chriss Street has been there, his office has been forced to increase fees or "cost recoveries" in 14 different areas, such as delinquent taxes and Mello Roos. But it has also been successful in reducing two others. And where it took about 105 days to refund overpayments of taxes when he began, which was a violation of state laws, this is now accomplished within three weeks.

Finally, the office is functioning so well now that it is actually "hiring out" to do work for other county agencies. For example, the Orange County Health Care Agency has delegated the task of collecting money for animal licenses to the Office of the Treasurer.

And Chriss is also now in negotiations with the county probation office as well as four different cities to do some of their billing and remittance work.

Chriss Street's approach to government has worked so well that he is trying to share it in a new book he is writing titled "The Third Way," which is scheduled to be published by Seven Locks Press. The book focuses on the successful approach of using leadership and cooperation instead of confrontation to stop turmoil and in-fighting and to become a team. Personally, I hope that all managers in government get a copy.

So in this time of so many failures of government, I am overjoyed to report that there is one county agency that is working like government should. And this comment comes from a Libertarian!

If you want to learn more for yourself, call Chriss Street at (714) 834-3411 and make arrangements to take your own tour. Like any good public servant, Street enjoys being open and encourages honest feedback.

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