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Public input sought at EID

Water district's new board chief wants panel to work earlier with the community.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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The El Dorado Irrigation District's new board president called for directors and the public to become involved earlier and more often in the agency's decision making.

The relationship between board members and district managers has shifted in recent years from one of confrontation to cooperation, said Harry Norris, chosen Monday by his colleagues to lead the board in 2006.

But the esprit de corps is sometimes misinterpreted, he said.

"The perception from the public is that we get along so well - almost too well," Norris said.

Board members and employees have their differences, but disagreements are hashed out in the general manager's office rather than the boardroom, he said.

However, Norris said, a fine line often exists between oversight and confrontation. The board's challenge, he said, is to avoid micromanaging without rubber stamping staff recommendations.

"We have to try harder to maintain that balance," he said.

Norris suggested changing the committee structure to allow directors and the public to weigh in on issues before they come to the board for action.

He recommended replacing many of the board's ad hoc committees with standing committees. No more than two directors can attend a meeting of an ad hoc body, he explained, whereas the entire board can participate in a standing committee.

Meetings of standing committees also must be open to the public, and their agendas and minutes provided. Norris said he wants to include the opportunity for committee reports at each board meeting.

Director Bill George, who was elected board vice president, said he welcomed Norris' recommendation. Lately, George said, he has found it difficult to absorb all the information in the agenda packet between the Wednesday he receives it and the board meeting the following Monday.

District Counsel Tom Cumpston also endorsed the proposed change.

"I have been a little uncomfortable for some time with the characterization of some of our committees as ad hoc," he said.

Replacing them with standing committees, Cumpston said, would further the goals of keeping board members informed and making the district's activities more transparent to the public.

Closed sessions still would be allowed, provided discussion was limited to committee subjects, he said.

"You're not sacrificing anything, but you're gaining a lot," Cumpston said.

Norris proposed standing committees to oversee ongoing functions or projects: drinking water, wastewater, Hydroelectric Project 184, recycled water, recreation, personnel, strategic planning, intergovernmental relations and finance. He suggested ad hoc committees would be appropriate to deal with three short-term projects: an update of board policies, replacement of the Pleasant Oak Main and construction of a temperature-control device at Folsom Lake.

Director George Osborne said he supported the standing-committee concept.

"But I want to be sure the chairman calls meetings when it's appropriate to have one and not on a scheduled basis," he said.

Norris said the intent was not to create more work for staff members. Committee meetings need not include the formal PowerPoint presentations that typically accompany agenda items at board meetings, he said.

"We will try to respect staff time and effort," he said.

Directors also agreed to consider changing the board meeting schedule from the first and third Mondays of the month to the second and fourth Mondays, beginning in February.

The change, Norris said, would eliminate several conflicts with Monday holidays, which require the board to reschedule meetings.

The board's first meeting of the new year will be the annual strategic planning workshop Jan. 9. The board is expected to approve its 2006 calendar Jan. 23.

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