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One of the best ways to get a clear picture of the Placer County budget is to sit through workshops held each August by the Board of Supervisors.

They are long and exhausting, but illuminating.

Each department gives a presentation loaded with facts and figures to let the Board of Supervisors know what it has been up to and its goals for the coming year. What I find particularly enlightening are the accounts of new initiatives, projects, accomplishments and challenges that accompany the statistics.

This year's workshops on Aug. 16-17 were exceptionally interesting.

Two themes came up again and again:

- Departments are continuing to do more with less, because the demand for many services is on the rise, but staffing is down; and
- Succession planning is a priority for departments that have many key employees who are near, at, or beyond retirement age.

I left the workshops deeply impressed by the department presentations and the commitment of County employees at all levels to serve the public to the best of our abilities.

Challenges remain for Placer County. We continue to grapple with difficult budget issues in such areas as library services and fire protection. The state's mandated Public Safety Realignment initiative has resulted in early release of some jail inmates in order to make way for the increased influx of new prisoners. We have deferred necessary work, especially on infrastructure, and we struggle to catch up.

It is clear, however, that departments and staff are doing a great job making the best of a tough situation.

Several departments reported being recognized for outstanding public service.

The Veterans Services Office is regarded as one of the best in the state at assisting veterans. It ranks fifth in California in terms of total revenue collected on behalf of veterans, falling only behind counties such as Los Angeles and San Diego that have much larger populations.

Child Support Services is among the top 10 programs in California for cost-effectiveness. For every dollar it spends, it collects \$3.35 on behalf of families. The statewide average is \$2.29.

Human Services, a division of the Health and Human Services Department, was recognized by state officials recently for having the best-performing call center in the state for helping its clients quickly and effectively.

During the budget workshops, departments reported on a long list of projects and initiatives that are under way or soon will be.

Construction of the County's new jail in Roseville is almost complete, the Foresthill Bridge is well on its way to a federally mandated retrofit and planning and design work on a new regional sewer system has begun.

Facility Services is getting ready to expand the popular 220-acre Hidden Falls Regional Park across 980 acres of county-owned land located west of the park. The expansion will provide more access to the waterfalls, new picnic areas and 23 miles of additional trails for the public to enjoy.

Public Works plans to start work next year on the final phase of the Auburn Folsom Road widening project. When it is done, the road will be a four-lane thoroughfare from Douglas Boulevard to the Sacramento County line.

Public Works is continuing on frontage and scenic improvements along Highway 49 in North Auburn.

Progress also was reported by Public Works on a project that is very important in Eastern Placer County: the Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project. The department is putting the finishing touches on the project's funding plan and hopes to break ground on the first phase next summer.

Public Works is working on a small project that promises to be a big help to bus riders who frequent Placer County Transit. It is a smart-phone application that will allow riders to determine in real time where buses are at and how soon they should arrive at the stops where riders are waiting.

Several departments reported on their success handling increased workloads with fewer staff.

The Assessor's Office, for instance, is working hard to deal with an unprecedented number of properties being evaluated for reductions in appraised values. The Placer County Library is facing tough budget issues because its property tax revenue is down significantly, but is finding innovative ways to better serve the public. On Oct. 1, several branches shifted operating hours to 10 a.m.-6 p.m. some days in response to requests from patrons.

During the workshops, I was also impressed by the efforts of the Sheriff's Office, Probation Department, District Attorney's Office and Health and Human Services to handle public safety realignment, a state-mandated program that is shifting responsibility for many adult parolees and lower-risk offenders from the state to counties.

Realignment has created unprecedented challenges for counties but the response of our public safety departments has been outstanding. They are finding ways to deal with realignment that are cost-effective and achieve our highest priority: protecting public safety.

The decision made years ago to build a new jail in Roseville will give Placer County extra flexibility in handling adult offenders who in the past would have been the state's responsibility.

That decision illustrates the importance of two themes that will be the focus of the last installment of my state-of-the-county series: the County's commitment to long-range planning and the critical role planning initiatives will play in the years to come.