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New Year, New Mindset

As governments do less, people must do more

BY JIM WOOD

Here is my prediction: 2011 will be a year of reduced government services. That's hardly a gutsy forecast; everyone is saying it. Community beautification, environmental enforcement and economic development—they'll all suffer drastic cutbacks. With that certainty ahead, let's not wait for government to act. We can take the initiative by volunteering, by doing things ourselves—you and me.

Mother Teresa put it this way, "Do not wait for leaders; do it alone, person to person." And as Nike urges, "Just do it."



Jim Wood.

Let's start with...litter. In the government-will-do-less year of 2011, Marin County and its cities will not have the workforce to tidy up sidewalks, open spaces and recreation paths. So when you see a flattened Starbucks cup, pick it up. If there's a tissue on the trail, scoop it up. And that plastic bag floating across a grassy park—grab it and pop it in a nearby trashcan. Ask yourself this: if you don't do it, who will?

Speaking of plastic bags, county supervisors are moving to ban their use by retailers. That will take administrative time and effort as well as legal wrangling and enforcement policies, all of which means spending taxpayer money, which will be in short supply.

Let's get ahead of government on this and tackle the problem first, by ourselves. We can simply stop using plastic bags. They are made from polyethylene, an oil by-product, and take at least 100 years to decompose because microorganisms — those tiny bacteria that cause banana peels, paper napkins and dirty dish towels to decompose — do not recognize polyethylene as food. That means our children's grandchildren will be dealing with the plastic bags we lug home from the store today.

Moreover, plastic bags are so damn ornery they require special processing to recycle; putting them in your curbside bin will not cut it. As for the plastic wrappers around our morning newspaper(s), those not used as doggie-doo bags can be recycled at Safeway, Rite Aid, Whole Foods, and the like, as California law requires all such retailers to provide a plastic bag recycling center at their store entrances. Can you tell I hate plastic bags?

What I truly love are the many quaint downtowns scattered throughout Marin — Mill Valley, Point Reyes Station, Tiburon, San Anselmo, etc. All of these towns are under fierce attack from big-box retailers — Target, Costco, Best Buy — as well as hundreds of national and international e-commerce websites — Amazon, Zappos, Overstock, just to name a few.

In 2011, however, don't expect local municipalities to use their limited revenues to rescue our beleaguered and beloved downtowns. It's up to us, people; so if you love your downtown don't just talk about it. Make the extra effort to shop locally.

Yes, that effort may—and the emphasis is on may—cost a few bucks more, but it's a question of how much you cherish your local Main Street. Is the longer drive to a big box retailer worth the savings? Can you put a dollar value on Fourth of July parades, Little League sponsorships and downtown Christmas displays?

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And what about the loss of downtown's sales tax revenues? Let's shop locally and keep those tax dollars for local police and fire departments, nearby schools and close-in infrastructure repairs.

Finally, instead of relying on cash-strapped governments to make improvements, take the initiative yourself. There is no better example of that than San Rafael's Andrew Perry, who became disgusted with the shabby look of the traffic medians along Point San Pedro Road. "This road will never look better," he said last year, "unless we do something about it."

That said, he and a committee of neighbors raised \$67,000 to meet the legal and administrative challenges of forming an assessment district. Then, they organized a campaign to pass a \$1.8 million parcel tax to beautify 4.5 miles of the street.

This March, 2,500 local residents will vote on whether to tax themselves \$68 a year to landscape, irrigate and maintain those medians as beautifully as possible over the next 30 years. "Every time we drive down Point San Pedro Road," said Perry recently, "we'll see where our money is going."

The year 2011 will be one in which governments do less and citizens, if we want certain services and to maintain the quality of life in our towns, will have to do more. That's my point of view. What's yours?

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