

Government in need of a correction

By James P. Mayer



Ask any cardiologist: By the time you are buckled over with chest pain – you think your heart is about to explode and you are terrified of dropping dead on the spot – it’s too late for diet and exercise. When that moment arrives, your only choices are painful and expensive – and if you survive, recovery will take time.

Our state’s governance problems are no different. We have long ignored the fiscal and governance versions of “diet and exercise,” and now we, as a state, are in need of systematic reforms.

As the world’s eighth largest economy, California is a global leader in innovation, diversity and opportunity. But our state is stressed by tremendous pressures associated with a growing population, demographic and social change, increasing global competition, and threats to environmental resources – and our ability to deal with all of those challenges are diminished by chronic fiscal and other governance problems.

The Sierra Nevada is all too familiar with these pressures: the ongoing debate over smart land use and the increasing despair over educational opportunities for young people; the lack of healthcare and quality jobs. Securing social, natural and financial health for future generations has become a goal worth striving for, but, sadly, full of uncertainty.

While these challenges require state and local agencies to continuously improve their effectiveness and coordination, state policy makers are stuck in partisan gridlock – on the fiscal and governance issues that are the foundation of public decisions, as well as the specific policies and programs that could enable The Sierra Nevada communities to reach their goals.

To meet these challenges now and in the coming decades, California will need to dramatically change how public decisions are made and how public dollars are spent.

That's why we have launched *California Forward*. Our mission is to transform our state government through citizen-driven solutions to provide better representation, smarter budgeting and fiscal management, and high quality public services so all Californians have the opportunity to be safe, healthy and prosperous in the global economy. It is a bipartisan effort funded by several major foundations as an investment in California's future.

We'll be presenting our views of governance reform and how to engage immediately in making changes to our state's budget and redistricting systems at the upcoming Sierra Solutions Conference on October 3. We look forward to widespread participation by the Sierra Business Council community. Your voice is critical.

We need you.

California Forward is working to change the way government operates in California, making it more responsive to all Californians. We want a state government that leads the nation in public sector policies, management, and vision. We also believe voters need better ways to communicate with and inform government, and hold it accountable, and that this is a critical element of good policy making.

Right now, *California Forward* is building support for comprehensive change to the state's fiscal system, including crafting budget reform principles to help unite people around the need to change the way we plan and prepare the state's budget. Please review these principles at www.caforward.org and let us know what you think. We are developing legislation in this area for 2009 and want to be sure it reflects your input.

California Forward has also endorsed Proposition 11 to end the current conflict of interest in the way electoral districts are drawn. California's government should be leading the nation in enacting policies that help Californians prosper in a fiercely competitive global marketplace. Instead, we are in crisis.

Now, more than ever, we need state government that can make sound decisions on big issues. Partisanship and ideological intransigence have created stalemates and gridlock. While we need budget process reform, we also need to change the political system to encourage and reward elected leaders for solving problems instead of exacerbating them. Why is it, that in the middle of this budget crisis, legislators appear to have been more worried about breaking ranks with their caucuses than about the consequences of failing to produce a responsible budget?

The passage of Proposition 11 would be a major first step toward improving the political system. Ending the conflict of interest inherent in California's redistricting process and replacing it with one that is open, inclusive, and adheres to clear rules that respond to voters, rather than incumbents, is a critical part of systemic reform. I believe strongly that incumbents should have the chance to continue serving their constituencies if that's what their constituents want – but the ultimate decision must rest with the voters.

Prop 11 alone isn't enough to fix state government. No single reform could be. But it is an essential first step in sending an important signal to the political establishment that enough is enough. We can help transform a system mired in political paralysis. If we pass Prop 11, perhaps we can convince our elected leaders that governing is more important than winning.

Government won't change its ways unless Californians get involved. Please share your ideas for making government work better and join us in making those ideas a reality. For information about *California Forward*, please visit us online at www.caforward.org.

James P. Mayer is the Executive Director of *California Forward*. In 2007, Jim was part of the team that developed *California Forward* from a concept to a strategic plan, and then led the establishment of the organization.