



Huber sips coffee with constituents, calls for government reform

By Mike Roberts | Village Life staff writer | June 22, 2010 09:48

District 4 Assemblywoman Alyson Huber sat down with a couple dozen El Dorado Hills constituents at Bella Bru Coffee Thursday afternoon to talk about her priorities in dealing with this year's state budget shortfall, currently pegged at \$19 billion.

With El Dorado County Superintendent of Schools Vicki Barber in the room, Huber balanced core Democratic values, including an unyielding support for education funding, with some surprisingly Republican-sounding themes.

The state is suffering from the cost of too many programs and too much government, Huber said, specifically in the form of a seemingly endless list of commissions, departments and agencies that get created to do a job, but linger ad infinitum, often outside the Legislature's control.

In a somewhat Libertarian moment, the Democrat from El Dorado Hills complained that the combination of term limits and a broken initiative process have tied the hands of state legislators to fix the state's fiscal problems, and reiterated her call for a constitutional convention to repair the California state government.

The assemblywoman didn't try to disguise her pessimism about the 2010 budget, and led off with a salvo aimed at the far side of her own party. "The folks on the left are not willing to come to terms with the serious cuts it will take this time."

Huber said the Legislature solved last year's record \$40 billion shortfall by whittling down programs across the board, but cut very few completely out. "That won't do it this time," she said. "We now need to make tough decisions about eliminating entire programs.

"California has been trying to be all things to all people," she continued. "That's gotta stop."

The only areas Huber holds sacrosanct are her three core functions of state government: infrastructure, public safety and education. That's it. The others will get picked up by local or federal government, or else go unfunded, she said.

Staring straight at Barber - the prominent Democrat was sitting front and center - Huber announced "I will not support a budget that has additional cuts to education. That's where I draw the line."

She's one of two women with young children in the state Legislature, she said. "It's important to represent that voice."

Her second priority is government reform. She's targeted California's shadow government of departments, agencies and commissions that often operate outside the budget process, with little

oversight.

“There’s so many that I can’t even get a list of them all,” she said.

Huber currently has two bills in the Legislature to create a “sunset review” that would force each agency to account for itself every 10 to 15 years.

Most departments, agencies and commissions would sail through the audit process, she predicted. The redundant or inefficient ones would be forced to reorganize, consolidate or disappear.

With two-year terms and a three-term limit in the Legislature, but no sunset review, the department and agency heads can wait out any one legislator that wants to eliminate them or their department, she said.

Texas began sunsets in 1976, she said, eliminating 58 departments or agencies along the way and saved 5 percent of its state budget.

Huber said she would like the existing Legislature to perform the sunset reviews, rather than create another bureaucracy. “Then maybe we’ll be more invested in the outcome,” she said.

Complicating matters, she said, her Legislature has become a bill factory. “I have 3,000 bills to vote on in my two-year term. The average legislator introduces 25 to 40 bills in a two year term.”

Huber limited herself to five bills in her first term, she said, two sunset review bills, a delta water bill and two transportation bills, one each for Amador and El Dorado County.

“You have to fight the urge to legislate solutions to everything,” she said. “This job is much more than that.”

Huber said she’s found she can often solve a problem by picking up the phone, or by giving a voice to someone with a good idea.

Huber didn’t try to hide her dislike of the state initiative process. The problem, she said, is that initiatives become part of the state Constitution. “They can’t be amended or removed by the Legislature. It takes another initiative.”

With less than 10 percent of the current budget unencumbered by spending mandates and a \$40 billion budget shortfall last year, the Legislature attempted to redirect mandated funding, which required more initiatives, which failed.

“The message we got was ‘that’s your job,’ but our hands are tied,” she said. “The initiative process has created a budget which no longer reflects the state’s priorities.”

Redistricting won’t solve it, nor will open primaries, she said. Neither will throwing the bums out, which happens automatically every six years. “The only way to fix the system is to change the constitution.”

It won’t be easy. Special interests that have learned how to work the system don’t want to see it changed, she said.

“With the average initiative now costing \$2 million to get on the ballot, it’s become mostly special

interests,” she said. “And there’s no special interest for good government.”

She warned her constituents about a “realignment of services” movement coming out of the Senate, which would push social programs down to the counties, which have more flexibility to raise taxes.

But huge variations in the fiscal health of the counties would create huge tax disparities between urban and rural counties, she said. “We need to decide which programs are important. The others are going to have to go by the wayside or find another funding source. That’s the reality of where we are now.”

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The Mountain Democrat Newspaper is published Monday, Wednesday, Thursday & Friday by Mountain Democrat Inc.

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