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Supervisors plan to drop cell phones

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 02/12/2011 05:50:00 PM PST

If it's good enough for Gov. Jerry Brown and California, it's good enough for Contra Costa.

Following on Brown's order to cut state-paid cell phone usage, Contra Costa Supervisors John Gioia and Federal Glover will surrender their county cell phones as a symbolic gesture of cost-cutting leadership.

The pair made the announcement at the same time they asked county managers last week to assemble a cell phone inventory and electronic arsenal reduction plan.

"We felt if we were going to ask some county employees to give up their phones, we should be willing to set an example, just like Jerry Brown did," Gioia said.

Newly elected Supervisor Karen Mitchoff, who just got her county phone a few months ago, says she will follow her colleagues' examples as long as it saves money. She needs to first find out if nixing her county phone triggers a steep cancellation fee.

Gioia's phone and data plan costs \$125 a month, while Glover has a cheaper, \$40 version.

The men said they will pay their phone bills out of their officeholder accounts, the noncampaign money local officials raise to pay for the rapidly expanding list of stuff the county doesn't cover.

Supervisor Mary Nejedly Piepho is unimpressed.

She needs her phone to do her job and says transparency requires that she segregate the public's business from her private calls.

"I don't understand the symbology," she said. "If my colleagues really want to save the county money, I challenge them to give up their salaries. I'll do it if they do it."

MEA CULPA: I mischaracterized in an earlier column the nature of Discovery Bay activist Bill Richardson's voluminous correspondence with his hometown community services district.

Of the corrected total of 338 documents Richardson has sent to the district in the past four years, only 164 were official Public Records Act requests, or PRAs, which trigger mandatory district responses. The remaining 174 letters were not PRAs but contained a host of observations and questions.

Richardson insists Discovery Bay manager Rick Howard sent me murky data. But the fault is mine: I failed to accurately interpret the material. My sincerest apologies.

But Richardson's larger beef appears to be a sense that I have painted his outsize communication -- not intentionally, he hopes -- as obsessive and eccentric behavior rather than valuable civic engagement.

In an e-mail, Richardson wrote "Many people, especially in the mainstream media and around election time, lament the apathy of Americans regarding their government. I took from your comments that I write too many letters, for your taste. If I wrote 174 non-PRA letters, I wrote those letters because I am no longer apathetic. I would

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hope that you would find that worthy of praise."

Richardson also notes that the district replied to only 15 of his non-PRA letters.

"Yet they complain bitterly about how much my letters cost them," he wrote. "If the CSD ignores 92 percent of my letters, how big an inconvenience could that be?"

The real question is not whether 338 letters is too many or too few, but whether they contain anything worth reading. And that, it appears, is a matter of vastly differing opinions.

GOT POLITICS? Read the Political Blotter at IBABuzz.com/politics.

AND FINALLY: It's come to this.

Just like a National Public Radio pledge drive, Antioch Auto Center President Tom Nokes is offering to match tax deductible donations up to \$100,000 to keep the city's police on the beat.

So far, the city has collected \$10,000.

Heck, if it works, go for it. Up next is a pledge drive for fire protection, followed by challenge grants for county prosecutors.

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