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Huber's first 99 days: 'It's as bad as you think'

By Mike Roberts | Mother Lode News | March 12, 2009 12:22



FRESHMAN ASSEMBLYWOMAN, District 10 Assemblywoman Alyson Huber reflected on her first 99 days in office with local Democrats Monday and described the California budget process as „painful, broken and undemocratic. Village Life photo by Mike Roberts

EL DORADO HILLS - District 10 Assemblywoman Alyson Huber reflected on her first 99 days in office before 50-or-so constituents at the El Dorado Hills Library Monday as the featured speaker in a town hall forum sponsored by the Sierra Foothills Democratic Club.

Huber took office in the middle of the state budget crisis, and called it the “worst, most undemocratic process I could imagine - it’s as bad as you think,” she said. She called for a constitutional convention to bring the budget and the process back in line with the priorities of the majority of Californians.

Huber, an El Dorado Hills attorney, Democrat and political neophyte, narrowly beat out veteran Lodi Republican Jack Sieglock for the Assembly seat formerly held by fellow Lodi Republican Alan Nakanishi.

District 10 includes Amador and portions of Sacramento, San Joaquin and El Dorado counties, including El Dorado Hills.

Huber was comfortable and upbeat before the friendly crowd, but her message was far from positive. Her first 99 days in elected office “seemed like two years,” she said.

She said she was disappointed at the Legislature’s inability to “work together as a body in a bipartisan fashion,” and found the partisan bickering within the Republican Party particularly disconcerting.

During the budget process influential Southern California radio talk show hosts initiated recall efforts for any Republican who voted for a tax increase, eventually going after their own leader, Republican Assemblyman Mike Villines.

The bright spot in the experience, she said, was the night Republicans and Democrats were forced to spend together in a room. “We found things we agreed on,” she said. “Normally each member is in

their own little silo, with their staff, constituents and schedules.”

The budget agreement extends through June 2010, but is subject to a special election in May.

She blames the state’s \$42 billion budget shortfall, in part, on a fiscal “shell game” the Legislature plays year after year, effectively pushing off expenditures into the following years.

But the main culprit, she said, is the initiative process, which has resulted in “ballot box budgeting” that ties the hands of the Legislature over time because the initiatives can’t be changed by the Legislature. They become part of the state Constitution.

Initiatives in the last ballot contained \$200 million in new expenditures, she said. “And it’s been going on since the 1970s.”

The \$42 billion budget shortfall was more than 30 percent of the state budget this year, “But there wasn’t \$42 billion left to cut,” she said. “We only controlled 7 percent of the budget.”

To get the budget passed, her Legislature eventually agreed on \$12 billion in tax increases. State sales tax, income tax and vehicle license fees were all raised for two years. Also, some ballot propositions are being sent back to the voters to free up funds designated for specific purposes in what Huber called a “did you really mean it” vote.

Some budget decisions will go before the voters in a special election in May. If voters reject the ideas, the budget will be up to \$10 billion short, and the process will begin anew.

Huber called the entire process “painful,” adding “I don’t agree with raising taxes during a fiscal crisis.”

But the impact of not passing a budget was far worse than voting for the budget she didn’t like. Schools would close, fire departments wouldn’t have funds to operate and the state was facing a \$400 million price tag to stop and later restart transportation projects.

Locally, 22,000 state workers were about to lose their jobs, she said, more than doubling the local unemployment rate.

Ironically term limits, which are the reason she is in office, also hinder the budget process, Huber said, because it takes time to understand the state’s complex problems and to develop trust relationships with colleagues.

Broken system

“This system is broken,” she said. “It is impossible for our budget to reflect the priorities of the California citizens.”

Everyone agrees, but few people are willing to talk about how to fix it, she said. “They just nibble around the edges.”

Without reform of “the core of the central document that dictates how we operate,” Huber predicted a state government defined by initiatives, leaving the voters with no clue what the end product will look like.

Huber believes that change is inevitable, one way or another.

“Are we going to allow special interests to do their own ballot proposition that calls for a constitutional convention, picks the delegates and tells us how it’s going to operate” she asked. “Or are we going to ask the Legislature to put it through policy committees, allow testimony, and have democracy vet the process”

Ten other states hold constitutional conventions regularly, she said. “California has never held one.”

The state Constitution has become huge, she said, with every page funded by a special interest. “Just calling a convention will make those interests worried that they’ll lose their piece.

“I just want to hear some discussion about this,” she said. “How else can we fix this broken system”

Huber announced that she was appointed chairman of the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, which recommends 15 to 25 audits of government programs each year, targeting wasteful spending.

Her other committee assignments include:

- Accountability
- Veterans
- Higher education
- Jobs, Economic Development and Economy
- Water, Parks and Wildlife

Huber has moved into Nakanishi’s Lodi office, but made it clear that she’s willing to meet with constituents any morning in El Dorado Hills. She can be reached in Lodi at (209) 333-5330 or at the Capital, (916) 319-2010.

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