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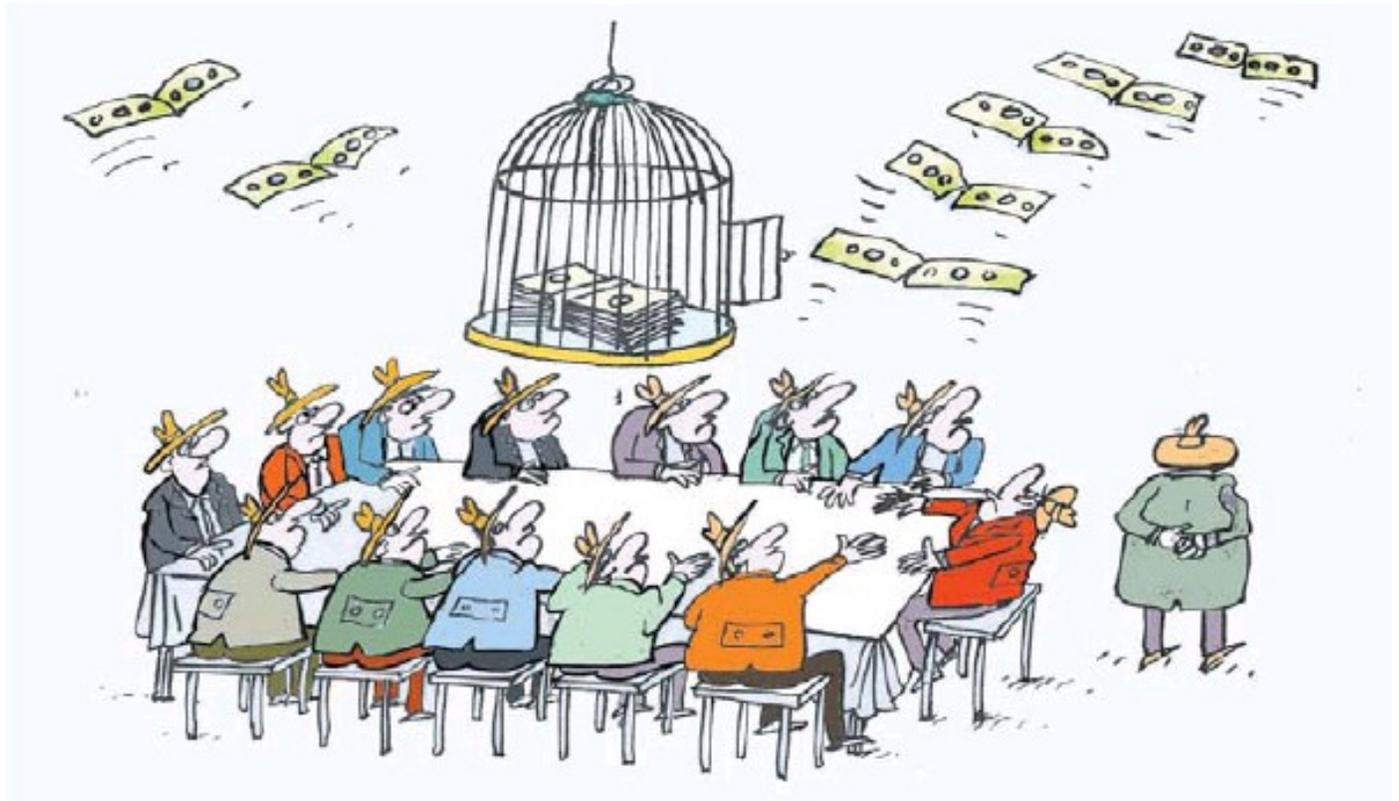
Article rank | 20 Oct 2014 | Albuquerque Journal

BY WAYNE JOHNSON REPUBLICAN, BERNALILLO COUNTY COMMISSIONER Commissioner Wayne Johnson is running for re-election.

Bernco Commission Dems lack fiscal discipline

Despite having to tap into reserves, commissioners go on a spending spree

There's a television commercial that features four scared and pursued teenagers who hide behind a curtain wall of chain saws instead of heading for the running getaway vehicle. While the teens take refuge behind the chain saws and the creepy "killer" looks on, the announcer says, "If you're in a horror movie, you make poor decisions. It's what you do."



The horror movie, along with the requisite poor decisions, made an appearance at the Oct. 14 Bernalillo County Commission meeting.

Taking refuge behind the chain saws were none other than Commissioners Debbie O'Malley, Maggie Hart Stebbins and Art De La Cruz. What they were running from was the reality of the county's budget.

For the first time since creating the county's \$36 million reserve, rising expenses, flat revenue and poor investment decisions are forcing the commission to dip into its reserves. And not just a little bit.

The FY15 budget was \$24 million short. So, after closing the FY14 books, the commission was forced to move two thirds of its reserve fund into operations just to balance the \$248 million budget.

You'd think tapping the county reserves just to stay alive would have sobered these commissioners and they'd be reluctant to go on a spending spree. Of course, you'd be wrong. In addition to the \$24 million, the commissioners voted to spend \$800,000 on social service contracts and pad their own discretionary funds with an extra \$250,000 to play with — all from county reserves.

When there have been available funds that didn't require depleting county reserves, I haven't had a problem using excess carry-over funding to support community events, neighborhood organizations, educational programs and other small projects.

However, when you have a \$24 million budget shortfall and have to deplete two-thirds of your savings to make ends meet, discretionary funds should be the first budget casualty, regardless of the "good" those funds have done in the past.

Our primary concern as commissioners should be protecting core and mandated services like law enforcement, EMS and fire, jail operation and infrastructure. These are the reasons we have governments in the first place and they should take precedence over everything else the county does.

But our intrepid commissioners weren't done yet.

Upset about facing opposition to their little scheme from Commissioner Lonnie Talbert and myself, the trio stripped the discretionary funds from our two districts and divvied it up among themselves. Talk about arrogance! I had planned to return those funds to the reserve and Talbert had pledged a similar course. But because of the shameful actions of the commission majority, we were denied even the barest amount of fiscal sanity in a budget that closely resembles a developing horror movie.

You are probably thinking that \$250,000 out of a \$248 million budget doesn't sound like much and it isn't — unless you understand what it truly signifies.

Democrats on the Bernalillo County Commission refuse to acknowledge the current financial situation and seem incapable of showing the kind of discipline families have been forced to endure for the past six years.

Unless they change course and do so now, they will be facing the real horror of a \$24 million deficit, with insufficient reserves to tap, as soon as next year.

Make no mistake, they'll be looking to you to save them. You can bet they'll be raising your taxes and they'll be blaming everyone else for their fiscal misadventures.

While county staff squeeze their budgets, forego raises, defer maintenance, leave vacancies open and implement other "efficiencies," their so-called "leaders" continue to spend as if nothing is wrong and nothing has changed. This isn't leadership, it's abject denial.

Leaders make hard choices. Leaders remember who they work for and who pays the bills. And leaders are the first to make the sacrifice they are asking those who follow them to make.

It's too bad that there are too few of them on the Bernalillo County Commission.

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