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Our Voice: A smart delay could save the county \$1 million

The Desert Sun

When the late county Supervisor Roy Wilson stepped down in August, suggesting that state Sen. John Benoit become his successor, many argued that it would be a mistake to incur the cost of special elections to fill Benoit's seat in the Legislature.

Though The Desert Sun supported Benoit as the best choice to fill the important post on the Riverside County Board of Supervisors, we had to admit it was a concern. The battle of the budget at all levels has been so difficult and painful, it's tough to add the cost of at least \$1 million per election.

At the time, Benoit said, "It is a cost of doing business."

Benoit was scheduled to take his new county job on Monday. Instead, the the Bermuda Dunes Republican announced Monday the appointment would be delayed until Dec. 1 -- a smart move that could save the cost of a second special election.

County Registrar Barbara Dunmore released a statement last week that said a special primary election for Benoit's 37th state Senate District would be held in January at a cost of \$1.1 million to \$1.3 million. There are 461,380 voters registered in the district.

The special primary is now expected to be held on April 13. It will be an open primary, with all candidates competing regardless of party.

If a candidate wins more than 50 percent of the vote, there would be no need for a general election. If the winner gets less than half the votes, the top finishers will compete in a special general election. That was originally scheduled for March.

By delaying Benoit's resignation from the state Senate until Nov. 30, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger then has 14 days to declare the need for a special election -- pushing the possible runoff late enough to be consolidated with the June 8, 2010, statewide primary.

It means the Senate seat would be vacant for a few months longer, but that's a reasonable tradeoff.

"This whole scenario presents a savings if there is a need for a special general election," Benoit told The Desert Sun on Monday. "This is the only way to allow it to possibly happen."

Since Wilson's Aug. 26 death, the five-member Board of Supervisors has continued to face tough decisions. A county budget report last week said sales tax and property tax revenue is still declining, adding another \$20.2 million to the budget shortfall, which now stands at \$70 million.

Meanwhile, a 600-bed expansion of the Banning jail is expected to be ready by March. The county needs to hire more deputies to staff the jail.

In the next few years, the county plans to build 7,200-bed detention center. A site was proposed in Whitewater, but the location has yet to be finalized. The challenge then will be much greater. There's no sense building jails if you can't afford to staff them.

Supervisor Bob Buster missed the last meeting while recovering from surgery. It takes a four-fifths vote to make changes to the budget, so until Wilson's seat is filled, the board can't take major action if just one member is missing. The board needs its full complement to take on these tough issues. Because of the November schedule, Benoit will miss only one meeting with this new timetable.

We applaud the governor's decision to appoint Benoit. The Bermuda Dunes Republican is a solid fiscal conservative and an experienced legislator.

The decision to delay his own appointment for the chance of saving the county more than \$1 million affirms our opinion that he's the best person for the job.