

car ownership (specific to gas-powered vehicles) in the County. The roughly 20,000 registered vehicles in Mariposa does not equate to the number of vehicles that use the public roadways within the County. Further, there is a percentage of registered vehicles that are “non-operational” or electric, for which no tax reimbursement is generated.

A lack of representation for rural counties such as Mariposa makes it difficult for leaders to allocate funds effectively. In the California State Assembly Mariposa County shares one elected representative with six other counties. In the State Senate, Mariposa County shares representation with twelve other counties. The existence of rural disparity is amplified when urban areas have multiple elected officials advocating for their concerns.

For Mariposa County's leadership, managing these challenges requires a nuanced approach that balances the needs of residents with the realities of its tourism-driven economy. The impact of millions of annual visitors on local government resources underscores the urgent need for sustainable planning and cannot go unrecognized.

Parallels Between County Government and JCFHD

The MCCGJ accepted the opportunity to examine two entities governed by an elected board during the 2023-2024 term. These entities, the John C. Fremont Healthcare District and Mariposa County, both experienced accounting issues that led to a budget shortfall, debt, and or ultimately, a mismanagement of the funds belonging to the institution. A common thread of systemic problems created the accounting issue, such as difficulties navigating the Brown Act, a lack of cooperation and accountability between Board members, inaccessible information, untimely action, and more.

Similar to the discussion on Mariposa County's workplace culture above, John C. Fremont board members were also observed to operate individually rather than a team. Opinions regarding operations were often withheld and board members accused others of inaction. Board members did not feel personally responsible for resolving issues. This lack of teamwork and responsibility is unacceptable when it comes to leadership, whether it be government, a special district, or organization. Leaders must make the effort to communicate with one another and make the attempt to understand all perspectives. When it comes to County operations, leaders must have a greater understanding of how different departments participate in processes by learning and accepting interdepartmental roles. In addition, both elected boards expressed concerns with obtaining information regarding the operations of their respective institutions, which should be resolved by regular communication between leaders.

The Brown Act is often used as an excuse for a lack of communication between elected board members. It is true that the Brown Act has strenuous noticing and quorum requirements that make it difficult for board members to discuss important issues outside of in-person scheduled meetings. It is understandable that the rules can slow down communication. Both County and JCFHD board members receive training(s) on the Brown Act and comply with the law, yet a lot of concern was expressed around violating the Brown Act. It is problematic that the Brown Act is cited as a reason for inadequate communication and subsequently, poor leadership, when the purpose of the Brown Act is to allow for transparent engagement.

There seems to be a general reticence to discuss controversial issues publicly during meetings. MCCGJ found that Board members wanted to be able to discuss situations privately prior to a public

meeting. However, the purpose of public meetings and the Brown Act is so that concerned citizens can participate in important deliberations and have transparency on board operations. A board should not be concerned that public deliberations will taint their image and subsequently risk mismanaging the organization by not having difficult conversations openly. There will always be members of the public that will have negative opinions of their leadership and avoiding difficult conversations will not resolve issues in a timely manner. The structure of public meetings also ensures that concerned citizens have a designated space for voicing their opinions and not interrupt potential discussions between board members. Additionally, there are staff members that can operate outside of the Brown Act to obtain necessary information in advance. Therefore, it is important that board members set aside their fear and need to perform for the public, especially when it comes to resolving difficult crises.

The relationship between elected County officials, accountability practices, and citizen participation is crucial for the long-term well-being of our County. When each of these elements function effectively, they create a strong foundation for good governance and community trust.

Elected county officials are entrusted with making decisions that impact the entire community. Their role requires a high level of integrity and a commitment to serving the public's best interests. When officials are transparent and accountable, they help build trust and ensure that decisions are made fairly and responsibly.

Accountability practices are essential for maintaining this trust. These practices include transparent decision-making processes, regular audits, and clear communication about the use of public resources. By holding officials accountable, we can prevent misuse of power and ensure that County operations are conducted ethically and efficiently.

An important aspect of accountability is having a transparent process for handling citizen complaints regarding county practices. When citizens can easily report issues and see that their concerns are taken seriously and addressed promptly, it reinforces their trust in the County government. On the other hand, when complaints go unaddressed, it undermines confidence in the County's ability to govern effectively and fairly.

Citizen participation is the third vital component. When citizens are actively involved in local government, they provide valuable feedback and help shape policies that reflect the community's needs and values. Public forums, community meetings, and accessible information channels all encourage greater civic engagement.

When elected officials, accountability practices, and citizen participation are all working well, they create a positive feedback loop that benefits the entire County. Transparent and accountable governance earns the trust of the public, which in turn encourages more citizens to participate. Active citizen participation provides officials with the insights they need to make informed decisions, further enhancing the quality of governance. In summary, the collaboration between elected county officials, robust accountability practices, and active citizen participation is fundamental to the long-term well-being of our county. By fostering transparency, accountability, and civic engagement, we can ensure a prosperous and thriving community for years to come.

It is imperative for elected officials and directors to move beyond merely acknowledging accountability and take decisive ownership of the challenges they face. Rather than spending extended

periods seeking outside consultants to analyze problems, it is essential to begin implementing effective solutions immediately. By proactively addressing issues and taking responsibility for resolving them, leadership can drive positive change and ensure the well-being of the community. The focus should be on swift, actionable steps that deliver tangible results, reinforcing a commitment to effective governance and public service.

It is essential for elected officials and directors to stop deferring problems for future leaders to handle. If a Capital Improvement Plan and line item had been included in the budget earlier, many current issues could have been mitigated. Instead of postponing solutions, it is crucial to take immediate action. Even if these actions do not lead to re-election, prioritizing what is best for the County's future should be the primary focus. By addressing problems now, elected officials can create a more stable and prosperous environment for the community.

The reliance of the John C Fremont Healthcare District and Mariposa County on external consultants is another parallel that exists between the two entities. Special projects deemed too complex or time-consuming for internal staff or that require very specialized knowledge make for the common practice of hiring outside consultants. While some consulting contracts prove beneficial, there are notable concerns regarding their management. Instances where projects consistently exceed both their designated timelines and allocated budgets underscore systemic challenges in oversight and planning.

Frequently, there is a lack of consultant familiarity with the needs and nuances specific to JCFHD and Mariposa County. This often results in deliverables that fail to meet objectives, or further delay completion. Often, this translates to money spent for an outcome that is less than ideal. Enhancing the vetting process for consulting firms ensures that hired entities possess the requisite expertise and understanding of local requirements. A more rigorous screening process will enable the selection of consultants equipped to deliver relevant and impactful outcomes aligned with the strategic goals of the Healthcare District and Mariposa County.

Under specific dollar amounts department directors (\$20,000) for the county and the CEO (\$25,000) for JCFHD are allowed to enter into consultant contracts without much review. Moving forward it is crucial for both entities to strengthen their oversight frameworks for external contracts. This includes establishing transparent guidelines for project milestones and deliverables, implementing regular progress review mechanisms, and ensuring rigorous budgetary controls to curb overspending.

Enhancing transparency and accountability in the management of external consultants will mitigate risks associated with project delays and budget overruns, ultimately improving operational efficiency and fiscal responsibility.

These proactive steps of outsourcing practice will ensure both JCFHD and Mariposa County better serve their constituents and stakeholders ~ the residents of Mariposa County.

FINDINGS		RESPONSES
F1	JCFHD and Mariposa County do not have their own clearly defined whistleblower policies making it	

	difficult for staff to report issues of non-compliance.	
F2	JCFHD and Mariposa County do not have clear procedures for establishing, managing and reviewing contracts with external consultants which often leads to contract delays, deliverables that do not meet original objectives and excessive financial costs.	
RECOMMENDATIONS		RESPONSES
R1	JCFHD and Mariposa County Board of Supervisors should each create unique procedures for staff to report issues of non-compliance.	
R2	JCFHD and Mariposa County Board of Supervisors should establish procedures that create more strategic engagement practices with external consultants to include pre-contract negotiations, clear and timely project review mechanisms and post contract review.	

The following governing boards are required to respond within 90 days pursuant to Penal Code sections §933 and §933.05:

Board of Supervisors: F1, F2, R1, R2

JCFHD Board of Directors: F1, F2, R1, F2

The following appointed officials are invited to respond within 60 days:

County Counsel: F1, R1

Per Penal Code §933.05(a)(1) and (2), responses must include acceptance, refutation, and/or clarification of the findings, and a commitment to implementing the recommendations, as appropriate, per Penal Code §933.5(b)(1)(2)(3) and (4).

Reports issued by the Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Grand Jury.