OCEA | ORANGE COUNTY EMPLOYEES ASSOCIATION
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September 22, 2026

County of Orange Budget Office
Attn.: Kimberly Engelby, Chief Financial Officer
400 W. Civic Center Drive
Santa Ana, CA 92701

Delivered via Email

County Finance and Budget Office:

This is OCEA's response to the County Budget and Finance Office request for public input on the Strategic Financial Plan (SFP). Based on our 20-year review of the SFP process and outcomes, OCEA has serious concerns regarding fiscal transparency, the impact of vacancies on the workforce and residents, and the way labor costs have been traditionally addressed.

Transparency

Since June 2010, the Board of Supervisors has directed that any money left over at the end of a fiscal year automatically be added to reserves. The County usually expects a budget surplus. But it assigns the surplus to reserves *before* the Strategic Financial Plan is adopted each year, so the balance the Board sees is zero. In 16 of the last 20 years the County's fiscal year ended with a larger than forecasted balance.

Reserves and the growth of reserves should be reported in full to the Board before any carve outs. Currently (and for the past 20 years), the budget is framed in a way that reflects stark scarcity while simultaneously growing healthy reserves. In fact, the most recent FY 2025-26 Year-end Budget Report, agendized for the Board of Supervisors September 29, 2026, meeting, once again repeats this charade. Despite all the incessant doomsday talk, Budget/Finance reports a year-end surplus and an increase to County reserves of $77.6 million. This is neither transparent nor accurate.

Vacancy Rates and Deleted Positions

The County has failed to address the impacts of the growing vacancy rate on the workforce and its residents. The County has deleted hundreds of positions while growing its reserves. County workers lack the resources necessary to provide the public services they are required to deliver. The Strategic Financial Plan must address this issue and provide recommendations for how the County plans to correct the vacancies-services dilemma. Furthermore, deleted positions directly impact residents. How many ways are residents paying the price for vacant positions?

The SFP must provide clarity about how the County will provide the services residents deserve and support its frontline staff.

Labor Costs

In last year's SFP, there were no budgeted increases for labor. For an organization that has a stated guiding principle of being an "employer of choice" this omission is remarkable. Not only are labor costs the County's single largest budget item, but it's the public servants who comprise the County workforce, which delivers

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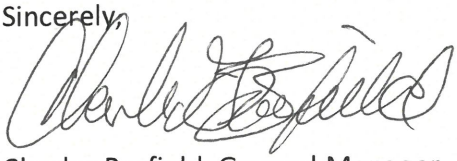
County services to residents. The Strategic Financial Plan must adequately address the needs of and implement a plan for the workforce.

OCEA and many other County bargaining units will be in contract negotiations with the County in 2027. The County cannot credibly claim to be an employer of choice while entering those negotiations without a serious, transparent, and fully funded workforce plan. Failing to plan is an active choice that leads to failure. It is a choice to continue understaffing, overburdening frontline workers, and shortchanging the residents who depend on County services. County public servants show up every day for this community. It is time for the County to show up for them.

Sincerely,



Charles Barfield, General Manager
OCEA

cc:

Chair Doug Chaffee, District 4
Vice Chair Katrina Foley, District 5
Supervisor Vicente Sarmiento, District 2
Supervisor Janet Nguyen, District 1
Supervisor Don Wagner, District 3
KC Roestenberg, Chief Executive Officer