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## Need for fire station causes alarm

By: *BRIAN ECKHOUSE* - Staff Writer

WILDOMAR ---- All looked good for Wildomar's bid to become a city: A January financial analysis found the community could sustain itself on its own sales and property tax revenue and a portion of its residents' vehicle license fees.

But there is now considerable doubt whether Wildomar can survive as its own government entity.

In a brief March 12 report to the Local Agency Formation Commission, representatives of the Riverside County Fire Department wrote that Wildomar would need a second fire station by July 2008, possibly along Clinton Keith Road, and likely a third by July 2010. The lone fire station in Wildomar is on Gruwell Street.

The fire stations would be needed, the report states, to maintain an acceptable response time in the face of the anticipated growth in Wildomar in the coming years. While the area has been labeled a rural area in the past, county fire officials say the development there had led to more of an urban environment, which leads to an increased demand on fire services.



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The cost to build one or both fire stations isn't the potential problem for Wildomar, commission executive director George Spiliotis said, it's the expense of staffing that second station. Developer fees could be used to build the fire station. The annual staffing expense is estimated at \$1.3 million, Spiliotis said.

More than a decade ago, Wildomar residents initiated a campaign to incorporate the 22-square-mile community, which is governed by the county Board of Supervisors.

Ultimately, it will be the Local Agency Formation Commission that will determine if that incorporation bid proceeds. One large factor in the commission's decision will be whether the new city could afford to provide services to its residents.

If the community can sustain itself, the county supervisors will be asked to put the question of incorporation on the November ballot for voters to decide.

Wildomar likely couldn't afford a second fire station as soon as July 2008, according to the financial analysis conducted by Orange County-based consultant Gary Thompson, on behalf of Wildomar Incorporate Now, the community group that is advocating cityhood.

A city of Wildomar would be estimated to have a budget surplus of about \$740,000 by July 2008 ---- without a second fire station opening that month, according to the financial analysis. If the county mandates that a second fire station be built, a city of Wildomar would be \$560,000 in the red, county officials estimate.

That would put Wildomar's incorporation bid in considerable jeopardy, Spiliotis said.

"I can't underestimate the significance of this," he said. "The commission has to make a finding that it's fiscally viable (to allow incorporation). If there are net deficits, the commission can't allow it."

WIN leaders Bob Cashman and Sheryl Ade learned of county fire department's report Wednesday, and relayed the news to Thompson.

"Obviously it's a big (issue)," Thompson said of the apparent need for a second fire station. "But to what extent, I don't know yet."

Ade said the fire department's two-page report doesn't worry her, as there was no data provided to support the contention of its representatives.

"Unless there are facts, it's just an opinion," she said.

Ade acknowledged that the community will probably need a second fire station, but is unsure if it would be needed as soon as July 2008.

"But three stations?" she asked. "I'd really like to see their backup methodology."

Ade also plans to find out whether the county has long-range plans to build and then maintain a second and third fire station within her community's boundaries ---- under the assumption Wildomar does not incorporate.

"Does the county have this in their budget? We need to find out," she said.

Bill Luna, the county's financial director, did not return a phone call seeking comment Friday.

Although Ade isn't concerned about the report, Cashman admitted it worries him.

"This is a jeopardizing thing if one or even two more stations are needed, and it has to be funded by the (potential) city," Cashman said Friday.

Still, he believes the unexpected hurdle will be cleared by the incorporation group, which presumably would allow the question of cityhood to go to residents on the November ballot. If approved, Wildomar would incorporate as a city Jan. 1, 2008.

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**What???? wrote on March 31, 2007 12:09 PM:** "Here I thought Wildomar was going to become a city. I planned on running for the city council. Maybe even be the first mayor of Wildomar."

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