

Monday, January 29, 2007

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Consultant: Wildomar can sustain itself

By: BRIAN ECKHOUSE - The Californian

WILDOMAR ---- A report on whether Wildomar can afford to become a city won't be released this week, and probably not next, but all indications are that the community can sustain itself as a city, according to a financial consultant hired to conduct the fiscal analysis.

"The city can happen," said Gary Thompson, the Orange County-based consultant. "The numbers do show that they're going to be viable ... as a city."

The analysis, which forecasts the potential city's first 10 years of operation, is required by law and is designed to determine if Wildomar has the requisite tax base to survive on its own with, at a minimum, the same level of services that the county provides to the community's residents.

For years, Wildomar residents have sought to incorporate in an effort to keep local tax dollars in the community and to control public services ---- especially as the community's population has exploded. Many cityhood advocates fought off a 2004 attempt by the city of Murrieta to annex the southern part of Wildomar, which they said would



have doomed cityhood efforts.

Thompson considered several economic factors when compiling his report, including potential revenue from sales tax and other sources. He said he culled numbers primarily from the county, but also from the state Board of Equalization and the Department of Motor Vehicles. A good chunk of the startup money for a new city comes from vehicle license fees.

"When you're looking 10 years out, it's not an exact science," Thompson said. "You look at market studies ... at the retail demands in that area."

One key issue is making sure a new city isn't overly dependent on one source of revenue, which apparently is one of Wildomar's strengths. The community, Thompson said, has a fairly good balance of revenues from potential sales tax, property tax and vehicle fees.

"The money's there, so things are looking up," said Bob Cashman, president of Wildomar Incorporation Now, the local group leading the cityhood bid.

But Joe McCabe, a member of the Wildomar Municipal Advisory Council, a group that advises the county on community matters, cautioned that until the report is in the hands of the county, it's premature to assume Wildomar will incorporate late this year or early in 2008.

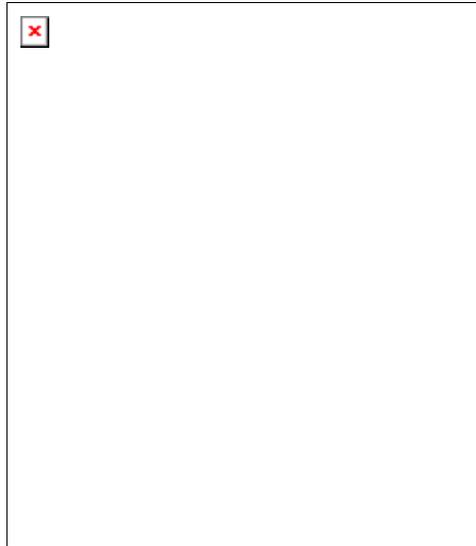
The fiscal analysis, however, is almost complete, Thompson said. After editing it last week for a final time and double-checking his math, he plans to distribute it sometime this week to the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees cityhood bids, and to Wildomar Incorporation Now.

If the commission approves the report, which could be made public in early February, Wildomar wouldn't automatically become a city. The county would still have to approve an environmental report and a map of the community ---- both of which are in the works, cityhood proponents say ---- and then the bid would have to survive a public hearing process. From there, it would be up to the voters.

"Do people want local control or to stay with the status quo? That's the question for people to decide," said Susan Lane, a member of the Wildomar Municipal Advisory Council.

Leaders of Wildomar Incorporation Now hope that question is put before voters in November. To achieve that, the organization would have to submit the question to the registrar of voters by mid-July to get it on the ballot.

"We're pretty sure these things will move along, but there's no guarantee," Cashman said.



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A desire for local control of finances, land use and parks and recreation is compelling Wildomar's bid, much like unincorporated Menifee Valley to the east.

"When the county has control, sometimes there are conflicting interests," said Sheryl Ade, a member of Wildomar Incorporation Now.

Residents have expressed frustration that planners contracted by the county have approved projects without examining the effects to their satisfaction.

"We want this community to be livable for a long time," Ade said. "Well, that can be better done from a ... local perspective."

Many Wildomar residents are unhappy that it will have taken more than six years for parks to reopen in the community. Three parks are scheduled to reopen this spring, while the county is building a fourth.

In 1999, Wildomar property owners rejected a \$25-per-year fee to keep parks open, prompting the beleaguered Ortega Trails Recreation and Park District to disband. Last summer, the county Economic Development Agency sponsored an election to reopen the parks that passed. Residents agreed to a yearly assessment of up to \$45 to maintain the parks.

"Because the county was in charge of parks, that's part of the reason why it took six years," said John Lloyd, president of the Wildomar Parks Formation Committee. "They can't spend as much time on us; we're just one small piece of the puzzle."

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