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County to consider giving Wildomar cityhood second chance

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff writer

RIVERSIDE ---- Riverside County Supervisor Bob Buster persuaded colleagues Tuesday to consider assisting Wildomar residents in their drive to form a city.

Supervisors voted 5-0 to schedule a hearing for 9:30 a.m. May 24 in Riverside to discuss and vote on a proposed resolution. Buster is asking for a measure that would use the county's status as a public agency to move forward the stalled Wildomar cityhood application.

The application stalled in December when a regional agency that handles annexation and incorporation matters ---- the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission ---- rejected Wildomar's cityhood petition on technical grounds. Even though cityhood backers turned in about 3,000 signatures, which appeared to be enough to trigger an election on incorporation, the group did not follow the commission's requirement to prepare a preliminary fiscal analysis before circulating petitions, officials said.

The proposed county move would relieve incorporation advocates of the burden of having to start over and collect thousands of new signatures. But they still would have to prepare required environmental and fiscal studies, Buster said in a memo to the board.

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"It would be helpful, in light of the fact that LAFCO hasn't done their job," said Sheryl Ade, a board member for the pro-cityhood group Wildomar Incorporation Now. "They haven't certified our petition. All in all, since they don't seem capable or willing to do their job correctly, this might be a better way to go."

However, George Spiliotis, commission executive officer, said the incorporation group did not follow the agency's required procedure for completing a preliminary financial study to see if the community's tax base was large enough to support a municipal government before hitting the streets.

"I don't know why they make it so complicated for cities to form," said Bob Cashman, chairman of Wildomar Incorporation Now.

Buster said proponents' failure to produce the study was understandable, given the circumstances. He said cityhood backers were forced to rush to gather signatures to counter an unexpected bid by Murrieta to annex the southern portion of Wildomar.

Buster said it also is understandable because another fiscal study commissioned by the county, Murrieta and annexation agency provided "90 percent" of the information that the regional incorporation agency was looking for anyway.

Buster said that earlier study suggested Wildomar would have been able to support a separate city. But when Sacramento adopted its state budget last summer, it slashed funding for newly forming cities and dashed Wildomar's cityhood hopes, he said.

Now, said Buster, it appears a solution is in sight for the state funding dilemma.

"With a dozen or more other communities throughout the state besides Wildomar now stymied in their cityhood efforts, bipartisan legislation has been introduced to correct the situation and restore funding to new cities," Buster said.

If the Legislature passes a law restoring state funding for new cities this year and the Board of Supervisors adopts Buster's proposed resolution, Cashman said an incorporation election could be held in either 2006 or 2007.

Ade maintained there is a need for Wildomar to seize control over its destiny as soon as possible, to avoid becoming another Temecula or Murrieta.

"Every agenda of the (county) Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors is filled with general plan amendments, so the sooner that we can take control, the better," she said. "We're going to have a lower population. We don't want to be rooftop city. There needs to be a buffer someplace (in Riverside County), or else we're just going to be another Orange County."

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