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Wildomar cityhood critics passionate, but not publicly vocal

By: BRIAN ECKHOUSE - Staff Writer

WILDOMAR -- Opponents of efforts to make Wildomar a city aren't as visible or as organized as their counterparts, but that doesn't mean they are less committed to their cause.

That lack of visibility may prove problematic, though, if the question of cityhood for this 22-square-mile community sandwiched between Murrieta and Lake Elsinore heads to the ballot, possibly as soon as February.

Critics complain privately, in letters to the editor and on blog sites, but are reluctant to step up publicly to make their concerns known.

One opponent contends cityhood proponents have used intimidation and personal attacks to quiet all but the most outspoken critics.

But Sheryl Ade, a leader of the pro-cityhood Wildomar Incorporation Now, said she found that contention "quite mind-boggling."

The opponents who have registered their complaints generally fear that incorporation could ultimately lead to higher taxes for

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Wildomar residents, and that a community that needs county subsidies to survive shouldn't be allowed to incorporate.

WIN leaders have disputed both points, saying incorporation wouldn't result in a tax hike (under state law any tax hike has to be approved by voters) and that their financial analysis of the community is purposely conservative, such that the would-be city probably would amass more sales tax dollars than predicted in that report.

A theory has arisen in some circles that there is another reason for the critics' campaign against incorporation, one even closer to their pocketbooks: that they're worried leaders on a Wildomar City Council would restrict development in the community.

But other opponents have written in blogs that they're worried leaders of a city of Wildomar would neglect the community's rural past and urbanize it.

WIN leaders have said they hope to preserve the community's country feel more than its neighbors to the south, Temecula and Murrieta.

"You don't want everything looking exactly alike, so that there's no diversity, no difference -- kind of like the 'Stepford Wives'," Ade said. "I don't care for that kind of look. I like eclectic."

The president of WIN, Bob Cashman, has said he hopes to prevent Wildomar from mirroring Temecula, which he has described as the "Disneyland of development."

Finances

On the surface, however, the dispute about cityhood is about Wildomar's finances.

One resident, Gerard Ste. Marie, recently paid \$25,000 for the state controller's office to review WIN's financial analysis, which projects the would-be city's local revenues and expenditures in its first 10 years of operation. Gary Thompson, the cityhood group's financial consultant, reported that Wildomar could sustain itself with a contribution from the county to help defray the staffing costs of a new fire station proposed for Clinton Keith Road.

In his challenge, Ste. Marie asked that state officials determine whether it is acceptable "for a county to offset municipal service costs to a proposed city by interjecting public finances in order to salvage an otherwise infeasible incorporation proposal."

Ste. Marie has declined recent interview requests.

Critics distrust Thompson's analysis, instead believing a 2006 report unaffiliated with Wildomar Incorporation Now that found a less favorable financial climate, resident Steve Beutz said in a May interview.

That also is the opinion of Martha Bridges, an outspoken resident who is critical of WIN's leaders.

She also declined to be interviewed, but in an e-mail, wrote: "My overriding concerns are that the budget and revenue projections in the revised (financial analysis) ... are inaccurate and strongly biased in support of incorporation. I believe they are, at best, overly optimistic and do

not accurately reflect either the actual costs (to run a city) or the tax revenue that would be available to support the new city."

Efforts could be moot

But Bridges' and other critics' concerns may be rendered moot.

In its response to Ste. Marie's challenge, the state controller's office determined that it is acceptable for a county to commit money to help a proposed city become financially viable. Some county leaders have championed the incorporations of Wildomar and Menifee Valley to the east.

County leaders, including Supervisor Bob Buster, support WIN's desire to have local control of their fate -- especially as Wildomar transitions from its rural past to the more suburban lifestyle common in Southwest County.

One premise of Ste. Marie's argument was upheld by the state: that it's inappropriate for a financial analysis to base a city's viability "upon unsecured, speculative revenues."

That also was the opinion of George Spiliotis, the executive director of the county Local Agency Formation Commission, which is scheduled to consider the Wildomar cityhood bid Thursday in Riverside. Spiliotis has said he couldn't recommend that a community incorporate on undetermined funding from the county.

But that, too, has been addressed to WIN's benefit. Spiliotis last week recommended that the commission approve the incorporation bid, which would be placed before voters on the February ballot pending the formal OK by the county Board of Supervisors.

Support for incorporation

Earlier this month, the supervisors unanimously agreed to return the county's annual savings of \$238,000 to \$310,000 -- as projected by Thompson -- to a city of Wildomar in each if its first 10 years of operation if those funds are needed to maintain financial solvency. That may not negate the board's earlier pledge to have county officials negotiate a cost-sharing agreement for the proposed new fire station, which would be the community's second. So, Wildomar could have a windfall of dollars, both from sales tax and from the county, to ensure solvency -- in its first decade, anyway.

That decision, Ade said, should end all questions about the financial viability of Wildomar as a city.

That hasn't happened, however.

Critics contend incorporating denotes an ability to take care of itself. Wildomar probably couldn't do so if the county Fire Department mandates that a second fire station be built in the 22-square-mile community.

So it appears under any circumstance, a city of Wildomar wouldn't have complete financial independence for at least a couple of years.

Other critics have noted, mostly under aliases on blogs, that Thompson's report doesn't provide for the expansion or improvement in community services -- which actually is a primary reason proponents have cited for wanting to incorporate: local control over services.

Although critics have been mostly silent, that could change soon, especially considering the Board of Supervisors recent decisions that boost WIN's bid.

"Many people opposed to cityhood have assumed that LAFCO would do their due diligence and find incorporation financially infeasible, thus making it unnecessary for them to speak out and risk the wrath of the WIN supporters," Briggs wrote in an e-mail. "Some are beginning to worry that assumption may be wrong and are beginning to speak up."

-- Contact staff writer Brian Eckhouse at (951) 676-4315, Ext. 2626, or beckhouse@californian.com.

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Comments On This Story

Note: Comments reflect the views of readers and not necessarily those of the North County Times or its staff.

msn wrote on Aug 19, 2007 11:02 PM:

" Why dont you just join Elsinore... You know you want to!!! "

Zygo wrote on Aug 20, 2007 8:28 AM:

" Here's the catch. Even though the county will subsidize the new city for 10 years, the city has to have new revenue sources in to eventually take over. What that means is commercial/retail. If the city can attract commercial development, then it will survive. If commercial would rather go to L.E. or Murrieta, or if there is opposition to substantial commercial/retail then the city will fail. It is nice to want to remain rural, but you can't be rural and be a city. Rural can only exist as a special district within the county structure (something that hasn't been explored by either side). "

KAM wrote on Aug 20, 2007 9:33 AM:

" I used to be opposed to Wildomar becoming a city, but I have since changed my mind. If my taxes have to be a little higher to accomodate a new fire station or make the response times of the sheriff or other emergency service faster, as in the other cities, then so be it. When I have an emergency, I want someone there FAST, not an hour from now, because we're too far away from the next city's service that we have to use. We need our own local services. I LOVE our rural atmosphere, but we might as well face it now. We're losing our country look and feel quickly, because of all the homes being developed left and right. I don't mind having a gas station or grocery store a little closer to home, but the building of hundreds upon hundreds upon hundreds of homes has gotten ridiculous. There's too many houses bringing in too many people too fast and it's putting a strain on our community. "

Put it To a Vote wrote on Aug 20, 2007 9:36 AM:

" All this speculation is nothing more than that - speculation. In order for Cityhood to occur, the voters must approve it. In order for taxes to be initiated, the voters - courtesy of Prop 218 - have to approve it. Personally, I don't think that the leaders of WIN speak for the entire community. It seems to me that they are seeking cityhood

to fulfill their personal goals. Just remember, when sitting down to vote - look at the facts, not the biased opinions and pie in the sky promises and for goodness sake VOTE! If you don't vote, you have no one to blame but yourself. "

Who Said wrote on Aug 20, 2007 10:19 AM:

" We should put a pool out to see who is the 1st to be Recalled for the false promises made. They [WIN] are hiding behind the CFA saying "we are not the ones who wrote the CFA, we went to an independent consultant". Well, when it comes time to raise taxes, we'll get out the Recall campaign. "

life long resident wrote on Aug 20, 2007 10:29 AM:

" Any of you out there, hoping to influence the number of homes being built, can simply forget it. Any plans already approved by the county will remain approved... That covers about every piece of land within your boundaries larger than 50x100 feet. You will have no say in what happens to property that has already been through the system. As for a fire station or police protection, unless you can do it the Murrieta way, and have your own fire department and your own police force, you will just be stuck with what the county already provides, except you will need to write a check to the county each year and pay them for the services, which you already currently get through your taxes anyway.... "

To KAM wrote on Aug 20, 2007 11:26 AM:

" Wildomar incorporating into a city will NOT raise taxes!!! All residents will benefit from Sheriff's that will be contracted to patrol ONLY Wildomar. Right now the Sheriff's patrol Wildomar AND all the way to Corona. This increase in benefit will not increase your taxes. It is state law that an area wishing to incorporate has to do so without raising taxes. After incorporation, the city cannot raise taxes without a vote. Any tax increase would have to be voted in by the voters. If you do not want your taxes raised then you would vote no. There are many benefits to Cityhood and they all come without any additional taxes! "

To life long resident wrote on Aug 20, 2007 11:30 AM:

" There will be a difference in the Sheriff's. Right now the Sheriff's patrol Wildomar AND all the unincorporated areas from Wildomar to Corona. After incorporation, the Sheriff's will be under a city contract to patrol only Wildomar. Therefore, Wildomar residents will receive extra benefit and no additional cost. Contracting with the Sheriff's is cost effective compared to building your own police force. "

Steve wrote on Aug 20, 2007 12:23 PM:

" Does becoming a city mean all sewers and no more septic systems? Anybody know? "

Grham wrote on Aug 20, 2007 1:56 PM:

" The city will need good ...really the best of Building & Safety staff, Planners, a great city mgr and a CC that services the people ...not them self... remember for the people by the people.... "

KB wrote on Aug 20, 2007 5:30 PM:

" No, if Wildomar becomes a city it would be up to them to allocate money to make those improvements and most of the time the sewer lines are run along the street then the property owners are usually responsible to cover the expense to hook it up to their homes if they choose to make the change. "

Zygo wrote on Aug 20, 2007 5:50 PM:

" To those that write the Sheriff will cost no more than present. Wrong. When you become a city, the C.H.P. no longer provides traffic enforcement and investigation off the freeway. The Sheriff, with extra personnel (\$) assigned to traffic enforcement and investigation will provide that service. "

To Life long resident wrote on Aug 20, 2007 7:26 PM:

" Don't be fooled by all these false promises of 'better service' that the WIN folks are putting out. We have an inadequate number of Sheriff's deputies, emergency services personnel and code enforcement officers now, and we will have an inadequate number if cityhood occurs. That's what their plans call for, that's what their budget has in it. You can only stretch people so far and expect them to deliver good service. Furthermore, the budget projections are based only on "like for like" levels of service far into the future, not any increases. As to paying a little bit more, the question is how many times would you be willing to pay for a bit more and for what? A little here, a little there, it all would add up quickly to a very substantial increase in taxes. And, what good would it do you to have better emergency services and quicker response time if they can't get you to a hospital or emergency

room because of the increased traffic congestion? Think about that. "

Hey Brian wrote on Aug 20, 2007 7:35 PM:

" Read the fine print! The Supervisors would only continue to contribute the estimated amount for staffing the fire stations - \$238,000 to \$310,000 - up to the point where sales tax revenues exceeded the estimated amount in the CFA. So much for your "windfall of dollars". Anyone looking for a windfall with this cityhood nonsense has a long, long wait in store. "

To Zygo wrote on Aug 20, 2007 11:15 PM:

" There will be no additional cost to the residents. Residents will receive an increase in Sheriff's services at no additional cost to the resident. "

To The Critics: wrote on Aug 21, 2007 12:58 AM:

" Apparently, people are reading into the CFA rather than reading the CFA. Much of the above information is apparently being thrown out there by the CRITICS to see what sticks. Hey Brian: There is no fine print, you need to re-read the Form 11 wherein the Board of Supervisors voted to revise Board Policy A-46 to allocate net savings calculations to the respective cities and continue annual payments for 10 years, to be reduced annually by the amount of sales tax which exceeds the estimated amounts identified in the respective CFAs and Direct the Executive Office to adjust net county cost allocations consistent with the proposed net savings displayed in the respective CFA. The fund amounts allotted by the Board of Supervisors for future incorporating communities and, in particular, Wildomar, were NEVER SPECIFIED FOR STAFFING FIRE STATIONS. The money will go into the future City's General Fund. The City Council (who is the governing body) will determine how the money is to be spent. If you want to know how a typical city budget process works, please take the time to educate yourself before you throw out any more mis- or disinformation. To the CRITICS who are continually commenting incorrectly and stating that the CFA provides only for public safety at existing service levels. Please define what you believe "Existing Service Levels" to mean. County Fire stated an additional station would be needed on the east side of I-15 in order to stay at existing service levels. LAFCO required that the CFA include this new fire station. Now...stop...and...think. What conclusions can you draw about what LAFCO thinks meeting existing service levels mean? Apparently, it doesn't mean static....which is what the CRITICS have been trying to sell. Most of the CRITIC statements I've read on these blogs have no basis in fact. The CRITICS have no personal knowledge of the community activists they are running down nor their activities on behalf of Wildomar. The CRITICS modus operandi is: It doesn't matter if it's true or not...we know if we say it often enough, people will believe it. Most of the time, the things they are accusing their opponents of doing, is actually reflective of their own activities. Buyer beware! "

Zygo wrote on Aug 21, 2007 8:21 AM:

" There may be no additional cost "per resident" as taxes cannot be increased. But, there is an additional cost to the city as the service which was provided for free by the state (traffic) will now be paid for by the city. A city is required to provide all law enforcement services including traffic. The Sheriff does not provide traffic services in unincorporated areas, only the CHP. If this cost has not been factored in, then someone has overlooked an expense. "

Steve wrote on Aug 21, 2007 10:56 AM:

" Thanks KB! "

To Zygo wrote on Aug 21, 2007 2:23 PM:

" The County Sheriff that the City contracts with will provide the services within the city boundaries that were being provided by CHP. It is figured into the cost. Please, read the CFA. "

Re: Zygo wrote on Aug 21, 2007 3:10 PM:

" So why don't you read the CFA instead of speculating? If you read the tables, you will find that traffic enforcement costs are included in the expense detail under law enforcement at the current service level as reported by the CHP. And what makes you think the state was providing the service "for free"? The CHP is paid from state money which the last time I checked is "tax" money. Your ignorance is really showing now Zygo. "

Zygo wrote on Aug 21, 2007 6:25 PM:

" Free was obviously a poor choice. I should have wrote that traffic services came from state taxes (for the CHP) which are not available for the same service at the city level and will now have to come from a local source - the

city's budget. I'm not speculating, but have also not read the CFA. My concern comes from reading different pro's comments regarding police services. I am not for or against incorporation. Your use of the term ignorant seems to be a bit of character assassination. From your use of that term I wonder have you examined all aspects from an unbiased eye. "

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