



Inland News

Wildomar's cityhood heads to its voters



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The Press-Enterprise

Residents in Wildomar will soon vote on whether they want one of Southwest Riverside County's oldest unincorporated communities to be the Inland area's newest city.

Despite a handful of citizen objections that cityhood may not be economically feasible, the Riverside Local Agency Formation Commission on Thursday unanimously agreed to let Wildomar residents vote on becoming a city. Staff reports from the boundary-setting agency indicate a new city would be financially stable.

If a majority of voters in the 24-square-mile area approve cityhood, Wildomar would be the first new city in Riverside County since Murrieta incorporated in 1992.

Incorporation proponents said they hope to get the issue on the February 2008 ballot, making cityhood possible by the following July. The Riverside County Board of Supervisors will set the election date.

LAFCO Commissioner Bob Buster, also a county supervisor whose district includes the 27,000 residents in Wildomar, said the incorporation vote was approved to put the community's fate in its residents' hands.

"The pros and cons that people brought before us today are for the long campaign ahead," Buster said.

More than 50 cityhood proponents packed the Riverside meeting room and applauded the six-member vote. The group said they realize they have a bigger battle ahead.

"It's sort of anti-climactic," said Bob Cashman, president of the proponent group Wildomar Incorporation Now. "We have been going at this for so long that when the vote happened I was ready for the next step. I'm really excited to put this out before the residents."

Three opponents spoke, including Wildomar resident Gerard Ste. Marie, who paid \$25,000 to get a state

agency to take a closer look at the staff report and financial plan.

Opponents are concerned with financial promises the county has made to help get the city running through its early years. And they have doubts this may not be the best time for cityhood, given the real estate industry uncertainty and its effect on property taxes.

"I don't believe that enough consideration has been given to the real estate downturn and the widespread economic trouble that we are beginning to see the tip of the iceberg of," Wildomar resident Martha Bridges said.

Cityhood support grew after Murrieta considered annexing the southern portion of Wildomar. As people flooded county meetings to fight the annexation, some realized there was potential for cityhood support.

For five years, members of Wildomar Incorporation Now hosted fundraisers and meetings, collecting \$80,000 to pay for studies that examine economic feasibility. The report went through the public comment stage and written staff responses to those comments.

LAFCO was expected to hear the issue in May, when Ste. Marie paid the state controller's office \$25,000 to review the financial study. At the time, a staff report from LAFCO Executive Director George Spiliotis expressed concerns that operating costs for a fire station could prevent incorporation.

The county intervened and said it would work out an agreement with Wildomar to help defer those costs.

Earlier this month, supervisors came up with an additional, separate agreement that would pay the community about \$270,000 annually for 10 years if incorporation is approved. The money could be used by the city for any services or projects.

Supervisors said if Wildomar or Menifee Valley -- which is located to the east of Wildomar and is also seeking cityhood -- incorporate, the county could save money it would have spent on services to those communities.

The county financial aid reversed any LAFCO concerns about whether Wildomar could become a city.

The cityhood drive was also strengthened by state legislation passed last fall. It directs state funds, giving Wildomar \$1.3 million to \$3.4 million each year. The county and state assistance would keep a proposed city from encountering a deficit, according to the financial report.

The report projected \$13 million in expenditures in its budget for the first year of cityhood, growing to \$18.6 million in 2017-18. The city would be bringing in \$13.2 million in revenues in 2009-10 and have a revenue stream of \$21.3 million by 2017-18, according to the report.

Opponents expressed concern with the numbers in the financial reports. Ste. Marie said residential property-tax values were overrated and that the money and parks the county would be handing over to the city would be considered inappropriate gifts.

Commissioner Terry Henderson echoed comments from the opponents and said she had real concerns about the financial future of the community. She was on the LAFCO board a decade ago when initial cityhood talks started.

"I have my doubts," she said. "It's not the same environment it was even 10 years ago."

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