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Wildomar cityhood vote heads to ballot in February

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Even without the unusual feature of a stamp of approval from the state controller's office, the fiscal numbers for Wildomar add up to a cityhood vote.

So decided the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission unanimously on Aug. 24.

A busload of Wildomar Incorporation Now supporters stood and applauded loudly once the votes were cast.

The ballot box in February is the next destination for the cityhood hopefuls. If the vote in Wildomar is successful, the unincorporated community will become the 25th city in Riverside County on July 1.

"It's a great feeling," said first-time cityhood advocate Manny Armienta afterward.

Armienta has lived in the community for the past eight years and says he learned a lot by coming to the LAFCO hearing in Riverside. Armienta couldn't contain his enthusiasm for the pioneering event in Wildomar's history.

"It's going to the vote of the people," he observed. "It's democracy in action with no outsiders making decisions. It's now up to the people."

The climate at LAFCO was a polar opposite compared to the hearing on May 24 when LAFCO executive director George Spiliotis told the commissioners their decision on the Wildomar vote would be delayed for at least 45 days.

His office had received an unexpected request from resident Gerard Ste. Marie accompanied with the requisite \$25,000 fee triggering a review of the potential city's financial future by the state controller's office. At the time, Spiliotis explained, Wildomar's comprehensive fiscal analysis failed to convince him and the LAFCO staff that Wildomar's incorporation was financially feasible.

The time delay resulted in the revision of the financial report, said Spiliotis, and also poured six



Photo: Paul Gallaher photo

Wildomar Incorporation Now director Bridgette Moore listens to opposing arguments.



Photo: Paul Gallaher photo

Commissioner Bob Buster explains his support of Wildomar cityhood during the Aug. 24 LAFCO meeting.



Photo: Paul Gallaher photo

Members of Wildomar Incorporation Now applaud the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission's unanimous decision to allow Wildomar residents to vote on becoming the county's 25th city.



additional months of municipal revenue to the new city's coffers for a solid jumpstart into cityhood.

In addition, on July 31, the Riverside County Board of Supervisors voted to forward the savings the county would gain if Wildomar became a city. Instead of the usual practice of a new city's making payments for the privilege of becoming a city, the supervisors approved a resolution some called "reverse revenue neutrality," referring to the cityhood "tax" to a county for its revenue loss.

The supervisors said the county would make payments to Wildomar for the next 10 years of the savings the county realized by no longer having to provide services to Wildomar. The resolution also assisted the proposed city of Menifee in their incorporation efforts.

The end result of the new CFA, remarked Spiliotis, is Wildomar cityhood was healthy and financially viable with enough minimum and growing reserves of 10 percent or more for the next 10 years.

In response to commissioner inquiries, WiN Consultant Gary Thompson explained the revised CFA reflected the current downturn in the economy. He also addressed the uncertain contingency of whether a potential sales-tax rich Wal-mart to be located on Bundy Canyon and the I-15 interchange could affect Wildomar's financial future, because it was included in the CFA.

He said he removed the sales tax benefits of a Wal-mart in Wildomar without substituting another commercial enterprise. He did it to demonstrate to himself that the city would still be viable without Wal-mart, he said.

"The CFA is modeled on maintaining existing service levels," said Thompson. "Money is available for upgrading services as long as they (councilors) manage the money conservatively."

"It's taken a long time to get to this point," said WiN secretary Sheryl Ade. She read from a list of Wildomar cityhood supporters, including State Senator Dennis Hollingsworth; Assemblyman Kevin Jeffries; Supervisor Bob Buster; mayors Bob Magee of Lake Elsinore and Doug McAllister of Murrieta, and Mayor Pro Tem Rick Gibbs of Murrieta.

Wildomar Cemetery District representative Gary Brown requested that a decision on the proposed merger of Elsinore Valley and Wildomar cemetery districts be postponed until Wildomar becomes a city.

"Let the city get involved in the decision," he told

the commissioners.

WiN Chairman Bob Cashman recalled on Feb. 27, 1993, Wildomar presented LAFCO for unincorporated designation with the footnote that Wildomar would be trying for incorporation at a future date. The time is now, he told commissioners.

Opponents of incorporation voiced misgivings and requested either disapproval or postponement of the cityhood vote.

Resident Steve Beutz said the transference of the parks within county control to the new city is illegal. Beutz filed a lawsuit to overturn the community's approval of a parks' maintenance fee last summer which is still pending in superior court.

Beutz also spearheaded the successful No Against Measure G bond measure which would have financed the opening of Mt. San Jacinto Community College campuses in Wildomar and other locations.

Tarbell Realtor Martha Bridges also voiced reservations regarding the lack of an environmental impact report, stating the general plan for Wildomar prepared by the county would have tremendous impacts.

"I'm not opposed to cityhood, per se," she said holding up the old and new versions of a Wildomar general plan.

County officials said the general plan would be noticed for public hearings in the near future for public input before the incorporation vote.

A representative from Bon Terra consulting also advised the commissioners that an environmental impact report was unnecessary in the case of Wildomar's incorporation because the general plan and proposals to construct buildings was not before the commission. It is a transfer of government, said Commissioner Robin Lowe.

Resident Gerard Ste. Marie, who made the request for the state controller's review and also filed a successful lawsuit halting the sale of designated park land to MSJC in Wildomar, also echoed Bridges' and Beutz's concerns. Wildomar Municipal Advisory Councilor Roger LeClerc said he loved living in the county with the freedom to paint his house purple, if he wished.

"The gestation of a city is not an easy thing." Supervisor Bob Buster said. "They want local self-determination and we ought to give the people the right to decide."

Commissioner Robin Lowe said, "I applaud you

for your tenacity. You've proven this is the greatest country in the world..., but your work has just begun."

As WiN supporters rallied in the lobby afterward to celebrate, they said, "Now the real work begins" and "It's just the beginning."

Resident Tracy Lobo crafted a Web site, www.wildomarvoice.com last fall to inform people about the cityhood vote. Her exuberance matched the mood of her fellow travelers.

"When we become a city, we'll have a say on what's going on. We'll have more control," she said.

Said Armienta, who plans to volunteer with many others to get the pro-cityhood message out, "I'm going to spread it to the people and tell them what the options are."

A Wildomar cityhood meeting has been scheduled for Sept. 18 at 7 p.m. at Elsinore High School 21800 Canyon Drive, Wildomar.

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