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- Classified Search
- Advertising
- Home Delivery
- Reader Services
- Traffic
- Home
- News
- Sports
- Business
- Opinion
- Entertainment
- Features
- Community
- Subscribe
- Previous Issues
- Letters
- Obituaries
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Challenges ahead for cityhood proponents

By: BRIAN ECKHOUSE - Staff Writer

WILDOMAR ---- Incorporation proponents insist the highest hurdle finally has been cleared: Last month, they convinced a regional body that considers cityhood bids to allow the issue to reach voters. It was 16 years in the making.

All they have to do now is convince a majority of voters to support cityhood, probably on Feb. 5, the date of the state's presidential primary.

Efforts to educate Wildomar's residents on the benefits of cityhood ---- specifically local governance ---- are already under way. They also plan to set up information booths at major intersections in this 22-square-mile community between Murrieta to the south and Lake Elsinore to the north and go door-to-door to promote their campaign, said cityhood activist Sheryl Ade.

Proponents don't believe persuading voters will be an easy task ---- just easier than their previous challenge. It could be easier ---- but only if critics don't launch a formidable anti-cityhood campaign.

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"The whole system in the state of California is set up against the formation of cities. You have to get past the minutiae," said cityhood proponent Bob Cashman of the lengthy bureaucratic process to secure the approval of the regional Local Agency Formation Commission. "The next thing, of course, is making sure people know about cityhood."

In recent months, Cashman's group --- Wildomar Incorporation Now --- has held information sessions for residents at area schools, and will continue to do so through the election. Questions answered include the meaning of cityhood and how incorporation could affect the 22,000 Wildomar residents.

"The No. 1 question we get is: 'Will our taxes go up?' The answer is no," activist Bridgette Moore said. "For some reason, people equate cityhood with your taxes being raised. But that's not the truth."

Since Proposition 13 passed in 1978, taxes cannot be raised without voter consent. A city's revenues are primarily derived from sales tax, property tax and vehicle-license fees.

The next information session is scheduled for 7 p.m. Tuesday at Elsinore High School. In the coming months, proponents also will staff booths at major intersections to promote incorporation, which they say will allow locals to control Wildomar's destiny --- as opposed to the government officials in Riverside whose focus is wider and more regional.

"It's just education, education, education between now and Feb. 5," Moore said. "I think if you understand (cityhood), you're voting 'yes.'"

Well, not everyone.

Although there are legions of cityhood backers in Wildomar, there is a strong and historically effective opposition. Two leading opponents --- Steve Beutz and Gerard Ste. Marie --- have successfully derailed other projects proposed for Wildomar in the last two years.

Beutz orchestrated a campaign that sank a proposed \$720 million bond in June 2006 by Mt. San Jacinto College, whose officials had hoped to expand its existing campuses and build a new one in Wildomar. Ste. Marie challenged the county's plan to sell 80 acres of parkland to the college --- which had been intent on expanding into Wildomar --- and won over a Riverside Superior Court judge in the summer of 2006.

Mt. San Jacinto College has since backed off plans, at least temporarily, to expand into Wildomar.

Cashman views the critics as a small band of opponents whose agenda is unknown. Attempts to interview Beutz and Ste. Marie have been declined or ignored.

"Those people who are complaining, we don't see them out there trying to help the community," Cashman said. "They're just out there sniping."

Still, the critics' history suggests WIN's biggest challenge could be overcoming a potential anti-cityhood campaign, not toiling for years to earn the approval of the Local Agency Formation Commission.

Ade acknowledged WIN has "a lot of work ahead" ---- specifically reaching new residents who don't read the newspapers or subscribe to her group's regular Web newsgram.

"The people who have lived here for six, seven, 10, 20 years, they know what's going on," she said. "They've seen the struggles. We need to reach the people who have just moved here."

The best way to do so, Ade believes, is through face-to-face contact.

"When you talk to someone eye to eye, most people in their gut get a feeling about you," she said. "Blogs are blogs, telephone calls are telephone calls. They're just not the same."

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" There are very legitimate objections to the proposed cityhood movement, and the WIN proponents would do wel to stop sniping at their opponents and stick to the facts. If voters are smart enough to read the fine print in the CFA, they?ll discover it tells a very different story than the glossy propaganda WIN supporters are broadcasting a these so-called information meetings and press interviews. Get all the facts, hear both sides, before you decide how to vote.- "

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