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∞ Cityhood efforts get boost

By: *BRIAN ECKHOUSE - Staff Writer*

The odds that Wildomar, Menifee and Ramona will become cities within the next 12 to 24 months greatly improved Thursday when Gov. Schwarzenegger signed a bill restoring critical start-up money for new cities.

Assembly Bill 1602 returns, at least partially, the vehicle license fee revenue that new cities rely on during their first five years. That money had been removed from the annual state budget for cities incorporating after Aug. 5, 2004, as the state battled to deal with deficits.

Since that date, no community in the state has become a city.

"Now, a lot of these (proposed) incorporations will be financially feasible," said Clyde MacDonald, a legislative assistant for Assemblyman John Laird, D-Santa Cruz. Laird authored AB 1602.

The bill will provide new cities with about \$50 per person per year from the license fees. In a city the size of Wildomar, with an estimated 30,000 people, that would mean \$1.5 million a year.



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AB 1602 thus will accelerate the cityhood efforts of Wildomar and Menifee and likely Ramona, as well.

"Without 1602, I think the prospects for incorporation were unlikely anywhere in the state, said George Spiliotis, executive officer of the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission.

Bob Cashman, chairman of Wildomar Incorporation Now, the group behind that community's cityhood effort, was ecstatic Thursday when he learned that Schwarzenegger had signed Laird's bill.

"This is one of the key items that we hadn't completed in our incorporation application," he said of the start-up revenue.

Now, just one item remains: a completed comprehensive fiscal analysis ---- "which we're working on right now," Cashman said.

A preliminary study of the community's projected finances indicated that Wildomar could become a city, if the vehicle license fees were available.

So, it's likely Wildomar residents will be asked to consider cityhood sometime in 2007. Cashman is hopeful that the election will be held in June, but Spiliotis said November is more likely.

Spiliotis, however, declined to predict when Menifee voters might see a cityhood proposition on their ballot. He said Menifee's efforts to incorporate are "in the planning mode."

"Menifee is working on getting money," he said.

In late March, the Menifee Valley Incorporation Committee received a second one-year extension on its cityhood application. The application ---- which lacks the completed fiscal study, environmental documents and a boundary map ---- has been stalled as cityhood advocates have waited for AB 1602 to be resolved.

Marc Miller, president of Menifee's incorporation committee, has attributed the standstill in Menifee's application to a dispute with a consultant and the commission over a study of Menifee's economic viability as a city. Miller couldn't be reached for comment Thursday evening.

The preliminary analysis of Menifee's projected finances found that Menifee's tax base is too small, likely meaning that the valley would struggle, even with the vehicle license fees provided for in AB 1602.

Still, 3rd District Supervisor Jeff Stone is optimistic that Menifee Valley ---- which encompasses Menifee, Sun City and Quail Valley ---- could be a city within the next two years. Stone, whose district office is in Sun City, has been one of the more vocal champions of Menifee cityhood.

"It's a clear path to incorporation," said Stone of the passage of AB 1602.

Unlike Wildomar and Murrieta, Ramona has yet to initiate the LAFCO process, but has

completed a feasibility study. But with the passage of AB 1602, the treasurer of the City of Ramona NOW committee is hopeful that residents there will vote on cityhood as soon as the fall of 2007.

"That's what's going to enable us to (incorporate)," said treasurer Bill Jenkin, also chairman of Ramona's Planning Group.

The five members of that committee are interviewing prospective consultants to oversee a requisite environmental study, and are looking to hire a professional fundraiser to help raise the \$20,000 needed to initiate the LAFCO process in San Diego County, Jenkin said.

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