

HELP WANTED

CUYAMA COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT AND CUYAMA VALLEY RECREATION DISTRICT

Introduction

New Cuyama is a small community at the far northeast corner of Santa Barbara County. Two special districts provide services to the community: the Cuyama Community Services District and the Cuyama Valley Recreation District. Generally, officials of these districts feel that they are overlooked by the county due to their small population of approximately 500 persons and their distance from more urban areas of the county.

Historical Background

In the early 1950s, the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company established the Townsite of New Cuyama (unincorporated) to provide homes for its employees working in the newly developed oil fields. It was truly a company town. Atlantic Richfield provided many services to the residents, including water and sewer systems.

By the mid 1970s oil production had slowed. Atlantic Richfield no longer needed as many oil field workers and was looking for a way to limit its obligation to the community. At the same time, the community was looking for a way to become more self-governing. In 1977, after an investigation by the Public Utilities Commission and concurrence by the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, it was decided to put the issue of forming a Community Services District to the voters of New Cuyama. The voters approved the Cuyama Community Services District and the California Secretary of State certified the District on December 8, 1977. The new special district acquired the water and sewer systems from Atlantic Richfield and began operating them in the public interest. Atlantic Richfield later sold the oil fields to the British Petroleum Company and no longer has a presence in the area.

In order to help the new Services District become financially viable, Atlantic Richfield gave the District approximately one million dollars. That money was invested and the District has been attempting to use only the interest from that investment. However, with interest rates falling, they have been forced in recent years to dip into the principle and now have approximately \$900,000 left in reserve.

The Services District owns and manages the water resources of the area. Its main purpose is to provide water, sewer and wastewater treatment facilities to the community. The District's well is 400 feet deep and provides potable water. The sewer system was recently upgraded and is adequate for the community. In addition, the Services District is responsible for the cost of supplying the power that provides the Townsite of New Cuyama with street lighting. The County of Santa Barbara is responsible for maintaining the streets, parks and other infrastructure of the community.

The Recreation District, established in 1958, is funded through property tax assessments. This District runs activity and sports programs for children and operates a twice weekly van service to both Santa Maria and Bakersfield.

Investigation

Members of the Civil Grand Jury visited New Cuyama on several occasions. They interviewed officials of the Services District and the Recreation District and discussed the needs of the community. The Grand Jury researched documents relating to the formation and the operation of the Districts. They also met with the Fifth District County Supervisor or his staff three times to discuss the concerns of the Special Districts. Officials of the Supervisor's office advised that they were aware of most of the concerns of the community and were working to resolve the issues.

Findings

Officials of the Cuyama Community Services District and the Cuyama Valley Recreation District expressed several areas of concern:

- **Concern:** The Southern California Gas Company provides natural gas for the community. This company recently told the Services District that they were going to stop serving the community because the gas lines needed to be refurbished and they did not plan an upgrade due to the cost involved.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: The Public Utilities Commission regulates the delivery of natural gas and will not allow the company to stop supplying gas to the community. Officials from the Fifth District County Supervisor's office stated that they would contact the gas company manager for the area and have the company reassure the residents that the gas supply will continue.

- **Concern:** The road serving the county park has deteriorated and is in an unsafe and hazardous condition. This park is used by travelers as a rest stop between Santa Maria and Bakersfield as well as by the local residents.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: Officials of the County Supervisor's office stated that the road was not on any map. Investigation subsequently revealed that the road was both on County park property and property owned by the Recreation District. The Supervisor's staff advised that \$15,000 has been allocated to repave the road.

- **Concern:** The play area in Tiny Tot Park is unsafe and needs work.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: The County Supervisor's staff requested that the County Parks Department upgrade Tiny Tot Park.

- **Concern:** There are two bridges spanning a dry creek bed used by students going to and from the high school. Those bridges need upgrading. One is unsafe.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: Officials in the County Supervisor's office stated that the county would address the issue. Two new bridges were subsequently purchased and are scheduled to be in place this summer.

- **Concern:** The city streets in New Cuyama were repaved in 2000; however, they are now beginning to deteriorate and are in need of a new seal.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: County street projects are prioritized and are accomplished as time and weather permit. New Cuyama street repairs have been added to the County Public Works schedule and should be completed this summer.

- **Concern:** The Recreation District covers a large geographical area. This District is not as fortunate as the Services District in regard to funding. However, a citizen left them a large area of land located in town near the high school. The Recreation District is currently using the land for part of the high school football field and other recreation uses. That land was co-owned by a land company that no longer exists. As a result, taxes have not been paid on the parcel and it has been advertised as a tax sale. The Recreation

District is exempt from taxes and does not have sufficient funds to pay off the tax lien.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: Officials in the County Supervisor's office stated that they had been in contact with the County Counsel, County Assessor and County Clerk regarding the property in question. They have been assured that the Recreation District will get the property free and clear as soon as all legal issues have been addressed. This should take approximately one year. The property will be given to the District with no current or past tax liability. In the interim, the Recreation District may continue to use the property.

- **Concern:** Highway 166 is a two-lane highway and is the main artery between Santa Maria and Bakersfield. A left turn lane is needed for turning off the highway into the high school. There are times when heavy traffic and the speed of the cars on the highway combine to cause a safety hazard when cars are stopped in the traffic lane attempting to turn into the school.

Results of Grand Jury inquiry: The County Supervisor's office is aware of the situation. The California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) is responsible for highway modification and construction. Caltrans has been made aware of the situation and it is under consideration.

Conclusion

After meeting with County officials, the Civil Grand Jury is satisfied that these long-standing concerns of the residents of New Cuyama were being reviewed and proper remedies being sought. Many of the problem areas have already been resolved to the satisfaction of the community, and those remaining areas within the County's jurisdiction are being addressed. However, an effort must be made to ensure that communications remain open between the Cuyama Special Districts and County officials in order to address the ongoing concerns of the community.