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Jan 08

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THE JACOB JOURNAL

Happy New Year from Supervisor Dianne Jacob

January 2008

After the Firestorms

Momentum Builds for Fire Reorganization

Effort to strengthen fractured fire districts takes center stage in 2008

When it comes to fire, what happens in Campo, doesn't stay in Campo. Santa Ana fueled wildfires aren't confined to Julian, or Santa Ysabel or any of the other rural areas where our wildfires originate. Wildfire doesn't know when it's crossing over from a territory protected by a well-funded fire agency to an area protected solely by cash-strapped volunteers. Last October, for the second time in four years, we witnessed once again just how quickly a tiny rural spot fire turns into a regional inferno.

The region's top firefighting minds, including the Fire Chief's Association and the Task Force on Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services, were saying it before the Cedar Fire: bring together the hodgepodge of fire agencies putting out fires in our region.

In 2004, more than 81 percent of unincorporated area voters resoundingly agreed.

Last month, the Local Agency Formation Commission, the governing body whose role it is to create new public agencies, moved

forward with the first phase of a plan to bring together the 65 separate fire agencies in the region. The first step protects more than half of the region with a new County fire authority, which would include 940,000 acres of unincorporated area currently considered unserved today.

Right now, emergency services for rural areas are divided among so many separate agencies that no authority is accountable for creating and implementing a comprehensive vision for the region.

This haphazard system is especially ineffective for managing brush, the most fundamental way to protect lives and property from wildfire. Currently a community that goes to great lengths to clear brush is placed at-risk by a neighboring community with no brush management strategy.

Consider that more than some 80 percent of emergency calls are not fires, but medical emergencies, parochialism seems especially short-sighted. If, on a leisurely visit to our beautiful Backcountry, you or someone you love is involved in a traffic accident or suffers a heart attack, stroke or other injury, cross your fingers and hope a volunteer is on duty.

Every other large county in California

“Every other large county in California knows what our county has learned the hard way...”

Serving the Cities of:
El Cajon
La Mesa
Lemon Grove
Poway
Santee

Serving the communities of:
Agua Caliente
Allied Gardens
Alpine
Barrett
Blossom Valley
Bostonia
Boulevard
Campo
Canebrake
Casa de Oro
Crest
Cuyamaca
Dehesa
Del Cerro
Descanso
Dulzura
Eucalyptus Hills
Fernbrook
Flinn Springs
Granite Hills
Grantville
Guatay
Harbison Canyon
Jacumba
Jamul
Julian
Lake Morena
Lakeside
Mount Helix
Pine Hills
Pine Valley
Potrero
Ramona
Rancho San Diego
Rolando
San Carlos
San Pasqual
Santa Ysabel
Shelter Valley
Spring Valley
Tecate
Tierra del Sol
Vallecitos
Wynola

Serving the Indian Reservations of:
Barona
Campo
Cosmit
Cuyapaipa
Inaja
Jamul
La Posta
Manzanita
Mesa Grande
Santa Ysabel
Sycuan
Viejas



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After the Firestorms

knows what our county has learned the hard way. By unifying command, training and communications, consolidation reduces bureaucracy, streamlines government and creates better coordination of resources.

I've heard only one individual in the region describe October's fire response as "near perfection" (not a phrase I'd use to describe the loss of more than 1,500 homes; just ask a family who lost one). In major fire events like the Cedar Fire and in day-to-day operations, our fire and emergency services network needs to be seamless. While it's true that several fire districts have opted out of the first phase over legitimate funding concerns, those same districts are still at the table, by and large supportive of the concept and eager to observe the change.

I'm always asked the same two questions about consolidation. One: How are you going to find the estimated \$24-26 million to pay for it? Two: What's the hold up?

To the former, stay tuned. That's not a dodge. It's a genuine request. Keep this in mind: since the Cedar Fire, San Diego County has gone from a government that had completely washed its hands of fire protection in the 1970s, to a

government that's invested almost \$120 million toward improved fire protection and emergency medical services. This includes spending \$8.5 million every year for equipment, training and staffing in areas that rely heavily on volunteer firefighters.



**Terror
Twice:** The early hours of the 2003 Cedar Fire (right) and the 2007 Harris Fire (left) bears down on Mount Miguel.

I believe that 2008 will be the year that our region's fire protection system moves from holes to whole. What's needed most is for residents to demand better.

*You can read much more
about the Local Agency
Formation Commission's
Fire Consolidation Proposal
and view important research
documents online at:*

www.sdlafo.org

Highlights of 2007

Fire consolidation led the list of Supervisor Jacob's accomplishments in 2007. Here's a look back at other critical issues of 2007:

Protecting the Pension Fund

New federal accounting rules shined a spotlight on troubling debt caused by sky-high retiree healthcare costs. The forecasted taxpayer price tag was a whopping \$1.8 billion which threatened guaranteed pension benefits for retirees and the County's good credit rating.

When the County's independent retirement board refused to adequately pay down its pension debt and continued to offer the controversial health benefits, Jacob and her colleagues sent a get-tough proposal to the retirement board. It called for an end to healthcare subsidies to Tier A retirees, those who received generous benefit enhancements in 2002 and could well afford to pay for healthcare.

The gutsy move forced the retirement board to address its long-ignored problem of costly retiree healthcare and adequately fund the pension system.

For solving the crisis, the County saved \$1.8 billion over 20 years and received a Golden Watchdog Award from the San Diego County Taxpayers Association. Standard and Poor's issued its highest rating of AAA to the County fund and health benefits for about 7,000 retirees have been preserved.

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Identity Theft Audit Helps Fix Weaknesses

An eight months long identity theft risk assessment helped the County better guard personal information from identity theft. Software upgrades, locking file cabinets and an end to the use of social security numbers for identification purposes were among implemented changes. The District Attorney's computer crimes unit helped conduct the audit.

New Places to Play in Lakeside and Spring Valley

Lakeside cheered the groundbreaking of the Lakeside Baseball Park located on ten acres of County-owned land at Mast Boulevard and Marathon Parkway. The \$8.5 million park will feature four fields with high tech turf, batting cages and concession stands. The Spring Valley Gym and Teen Center near La Presa Middle School opened its doors. The 16,000 square foot facility boasts basketball and volleyball courts, recording studio and counseling center.

New Ramona Library and Alpine Sheriff's Station

The new Ramona Library cleared a major hurdle when the County budgeted nearly \$410,000 to move the project forward. The proposed 20,000 square-foot library on Main Street will be almost four times larger than the existing library on Montecito Road and is the cornerstone of larger intergenerational campus planned for site. In Alpine, the Sheriff's Department is about to open the doors of its new two-story station along Alpine Boulevard. The building gives the Sheriff's Department about three times the space of the old station on Tavern Road.

Coffee and Conversation

Got an idea to improve County government? Share your thoughts with Supervisor Jacob at her next informal community coffee!

Friday, February 29 at 8:30 a.m.

**Mario's Italian Restaurant
12440 Woodside Ave.
Lakeside**

Stopping the Sunrise Powerlink

San Diego Gas and Electric attempted an end-run around California's transmission line permitting process by seeking to include the route of its controversial Sunrise Powerlink in a so-called "National Interest Electric Transmission Corridor." Supervisor Jacob maintained her steadfast opposition to Sunrise by opposing the corridor designation at a public hearing last year. The designation would give federal regulators the power to overrule the State if Sunrise is rejected. The final decision is now delayed.

Scrutinizing the Transportation Impact Fee

Responding to complaints about the County's Transportation Impact Fee, Supervisor Jacob initiated a review of the controversial fee. Designed to ensure money for roads and infrastructure to support new development, the TIF was required under state law. At the time, traffic engineers and developers warned that the fees could result in heavy or undo strain on worthy commercial and industrial projects.

Water-wise Landscaping at County buildings

The County amended its landscaping policy to mandate drought tolerant and fire resistant landscaping at all new County projects including active parks, libraries, and roadways. Dwindling water supplies and destructive wildfire are growing regional concerns.

Using Inmates to Clear Brush?

At Supervisor Jacob's request, the Sheriff, the Probation Department and Cal Fire are investigating whether County inmates can help clear dangerous brush to better protect communities from wildfires. Under the direction of Cal Fire, more State prisoners than ever already clear brush. Supervisor Jacob wants to know if County inmates can assist because Backcountry fuel loads are still tinder dry.

A Rating System for Childcare Facilities

The County lent its support to State legislation that would create a safety rating system for childcare facilities. Modeled after a program that assigns health and safety grades to restaurants, Assembly Bill 313 calls for safety ratings to be posted on State licensed childcare facilities in noticeable spots like a main door or a front window. If approved, the State Department of Social Services would be required to update the ratings frequently and post the information on its website.