Municipal Service Review

ON RESOURCE CONSERVATION DISTRICTS (RCDS)

DRAFT REPORT | December 2020

Legislative Context

LAFCOs have been responsible since 1963 to regulate and plan the formation, expansion, and reorganization of cities and special districts and their service areas in California with limited exceptions. This includes regularly preparing municipal service reviews to assess local government agencies and their services to inform LAFCOs' regulatory and planning activities relative to local needs and conditions.

Focus of this MSR

This report serves as San Diego LAFCO's independent snapshot of the level and range of services provided by the three RCDs in San Diego County – Mission, Greater San Diego County, and Upper San Luis Rey – and within their combined jurisdictions that cover ¾th of all San Diego County and 1.6 million residents. The report draws on information collected and analyzed between 2015 and 2019.

Central Conclusions

Introductory Municipal Service Review…

This report marks the first municipal service review on RCDs in San Diego County and orients the document to focus on establishing baseline information with the intention of expanding the analysis – and specifically providing more quantitative measurements – in future municipal service reviews.



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And Then There Were Three...
The number of RCDs in San Diego County has decreased from their height in the 1970s from 15 to 3 – Mission, Greater San Diego County, and Upper San Luis Rey – and attributed to restrictions in generating new tax revenues and an expanding urban footprint.

Aging Principal Act...
RCDs' principal act has become increasingly outdated in aligning service powers with current resource conservation practices and needs as well as LAFCOs' oversight role to regulate functions and classes of services. The cumulative effect means higher levels of local discretion being exercised by RCDs and LAFCO that may or may not sync with legislative expectations.

Influence of Grant Funding...
All three RCDs in San Diego County operate similarly to non-profit organizations with grants more so than other factors guiding decision-making in delivering municipal services. The pursuit of grants has also prompted two of the agencies – Mission and Greater San Diego County – to take on service programs beyond the clear and/or explicit provision in statute.

Boundaries Need to Matter...
Two of the three RCDS – Mission and Greater San Diego County – have invested significant resources in providing services outside their jurisdictional boundaries without proper approvals and diminish the function and role of jurisdictional boundaries and have contributed to conflict among the agencies.

Widening Strike Zone...
All three RCDs' formations date to a period where constituency needs were focused on receiving water and soil expertise to protect and enhance farmland. Subsequent demographic and societal changes have measurably expanded these roles to be more holistic and now connect to wildlife habit, wildfire prevention, and climate change through technical, education, and advocacy services.

Stress-Testing Underway...
Two of the three RCDs – Mission and Greater San Diego RCD – finished the five-year report period trending negatively in standard financial measurements. These fiscal stresses were most impactful for Mission RCD as they finished the report period with only one month of reserves to cover average operating costs.

Purposeful LAFCO Pause...
The introductory role of this municipal service review coupled with other noted factors – including the immediate need to sync services and boundaries – suggest a purposeful pause is merited before proceeding with next level analyses. This includes deferring the evaluation of shared resource opportunities, such as potential functional and/or political consolidations

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Actionable Recommendations

- San Diego LAFCO affirms RCD functions are explicit municipal services and support – both through direct and indirect means – orderly growth and development in San Diego County. LAFCO should accordingly incorporate regular reviews of RCD functions as part of future municipal service review cycles.
- San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with all three RCDs in developing performance measurements to help quantify capacity-demand relationships in each jurisdiction to appropriately inform future studies and/or reorganizations.
- San Diego LAFCO should work with stakeholders and local legislators to propose a comprehensive rewrite of the RCD principal act and – among other virtues – clarify service function powers relative to current and anticipated community needs.
- All three RCDs should voluntarily proceed in taking necessary corrective measures to ensure regulatory compliance with San Diego LAFCO and statutory emphasis therein to align municipal services with jurisdictional boundaries.
- All three affected agencies are reminded to request and receive written approval or confirmation of exemption from San Diego LAFCO before entering contracts or agreements to provide municipal services outside their jurisdictional boundaries.
- San Diego LAFCO should expand on the baseline information collected in this introductory municipal service review and provide a more quantified assessment of the three RCD services and related trends. The subsequent review should also – markedly – dutifully explore reorganization options, including functional and/or political consolidation opportunities.
- San Diego LAFCO should proceed with updating all three RCDs existing spheres of influences – the State's official boundary and service area designation for local agencies – without changes.



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