

SHINING A LIGHT ON A SMALL SPECIAL DISTRICT

by Ventura County Supervisor Linda Park, July 2007

Local government varies in size from county government, to city government, to small special districts. There are dozens of small special districts in our county, with residents sitting on their boards and overseeing their district's operations. The special districts are usually funded by water or sewer rates or assessments. These small public agencies run cemeteries, sanitation districts, water districts and community service districts. Despite being public, few people know about them, and unless something controversial comes about, they receive very little scrutiny.

Last week the Ventura County Grand Jury reported about one special district, Triunfo Sanitation District, in eastern Ventura County that has an unusual board composition. Two of the five seats on the Triunfo board are elected from the district, while the other three seats are appointed members from other boards. Because I sit on the Board of Supervisors I am automatically an appointed member of Triunfo.

Triunfo's unique board composition prevents voters in the district from electing a majority of the board, and results in Triunfo board members not living in the area that they serve. When local issues come up, such as which hill should have a water tank in the small community that Triunfo serves, the decision will be made by five people, three of whom do not live in Oak Park where the water tank will be built.

Yet the majority of the Triunfo board is opposed to letting people who live in the district elect people to fill their seats. They defeated my motion to have all five board members elected from the district. One appointed board member who lives thirty miles outside the District argued against elections because, he said, the Triunfo board is doing such a great job the way it is. Yet this appointed member and his fellow board members have sued their partner agency (Las Virgenes Municipal Water District) that provides sewer service to Triunfo customers, a move that cost ratepayers \$500,000. Additionally, he and his board waited over two years to correct a bad investment decision losing over \$300,000 that they could have saved. The board also accepted without question a reimbursement of lost interest from the contractors that manage Triunfo's money, a reimbursement amount the Grand Jury called questionable.

There are more decisions yet to be made. Will the board hire an independent firm to review whether Triunfo was properly reimbursed for the poor financial management that left Triunfo's cash reserves in a non-interest bearing account? Since one of Triunfo's board members is a member of that contracting agency that manages Triunfo's money, should he be allowed to vote whether to audit his own agency? There are other important votes coming up for Triunfo board members: the final decision where to put the water tank, whether to continue with the same partnership with the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District, and whether to allow the Triunfo board to be an all elected board.

It's difficult to get people who are appointed and receive compensation to give up their

seats for an election. The Grand Jury found that the Triunfo Board members go to approximately five conferences a year in such places as Squaw Valley, San Diego, Monterey, Washington, D.C., and Orlando, Florida where their travel, dining, conference registration and hotels are paid for by rate payers. The board members also receive \$218 a day while they're at the conference, which is the fee they get for attending any Triunfo meeting and another \$218 for attending quarterly breakfasts held alternately in Thousand Oaks and Oxnard that are put on by a local water agency association. There aren't too many compelling reasons for these board members to allow for an election to fill their seats, though they are empowered to do so. Unfortunately, as a result of their unwillingness, residents can't elect who they want to set their water and sewer rates, or vote the board out of office if they don't like how the board is spending their money.

This is just one example of one special district that is having a light shined on it. The Sacramento Bee did a series of investigative reports on special districts in the Sacramento area and exposed much of what occurs when public agencies operate outside the public eye with little accountability. The Grand Jury report, which recommended Triunfo become a fully elected board, expresses a core belief of citizens. Newspaper articles exposing poor fiscal management, and members of the public attending and participating at meetings, has brought a higher level of scrutiny to the Triunfo board. There is now more attention to see that their decisions are made in the best interest of the public. They will have another opportunity to decide if they should become an all elected board when they have their next public meeting July 16th at 5:10 pm in the meeting room of the Oak Park Library. Hopefully the board will change their minds and let the voters decide.