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Drive for city down to wire

El Dorado Hills finds itself divided by the campaign for incorporation.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado Hills' road to independence has been a rocky one, marked by funding problems, lawsuits, settlement agreements and a race to meet deadlines for the November election.

The final mile isn't proving any easier.

Although incorporation proponents earlier this year said polls indicated 70 percent of residents would support cityhood, they face a strong opposition campaign led by former El Dorado County Supervisor Bob Dorr.

The opponents say the official study, which shows a city of El Dorado Hills would be financially viable, did not go far enough in examining worst-case scenarios.

If development and tax revenues did not meet projections, they predict that city leaders would turn to development of big-box stores and auto malls, or increased fees, to generate revenue.

Their Web site, saveedh.com, juxtaposes a photo of the community's hills and oak trees with one of a crowded urban center. Superimposed on the scenes is the slogan "Measure P is to turn Hills to Hoods."

Proponents accuse the critics of using scare tactics and devote a portion of their Web site, edhcity.org, to "facts and myths." They say it's time El Dorado Hills took control of its destiny. But some say the outcome to the incorporation vote now appears less certain.

"I don't think it's a slam-dunk anymore, but I think it will pass," said Wayne Lowery, general manager of the El Dorado Hills Community Services District and chairman of the El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce board of directors.

Proponents have in their camp at least 18 of the 19 candidates for what would become the community's first city council if Measure P passes Nov. 8 with a simple majority. One candidate declined to be interviewed.

Driving incorporation is dissatisfaction with county services that cityhood proponents say have not kept pace with a population that has tripled to approximately 30,000 since 1990. Traffic congestion and limited law enforcement services top the list of grievances.

Though incorporation foes point to several multimillion-dollar road projects undertaken by the county, cityhood proponents say the flurry of activity coincided with their push for local control.

"Some of the projects they're putting in place now should have been done 10 years ago," said Justin Masters, a council candidate and El Dorado Hills Community Services District board member. "It's too little, too late."

Cityhood supporters say local control also would result in improved law enforcement. Currently, sheriff's deputies assigned to El Dorado Hills cover other areas of the county as well.

Norm Rowett, a council candidate and vice chairman of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Committee,

said cities of comparable size report police response times of three to five minutes. It sometimes takes deputies 30 to 40 minutes to respond to an incident in El Dorado Hills, he said.

El Dorado Hills Community Services District board members, four of whom are seeking council seats, voiced frustration with delays in the county planning and permitting process. The services district would be dissolved and its responsibilities assumed by the city if incorporation occurs.

The district worked more than a year to obtain planning approval to build a teen center, said council candidate and board member Larry Brilliant. City government, he said, "would be more responsive and accountable to the community."

Incorporation opponents maintain that it also would be more expensive. They have focused on the comprehensive fiscal analysis prepared by the firm of Economic & Planning Systems.

"The CFA shows that you have to have 900 new homes every year just to make budget," Dorr said during a recent community forum on incorporation.

Cityhood supporters stress that the firm that prepared the fiscal analysis was hired by the El Dorado County Local Agency Formation Commission and has done similar studies for cities statewide.

Because about 95 percent of the land in the incorporation boundaries has been developed or is under county-approved development agreements, incorporation foes say a new city also would have to resort to multistory apartment complexes to meet its fair share of affordable housing.

Although the city would have to provide opportunities for affordable housing through zoning and incentive programs, incorporation supporters point out that development of such units is market-driven. They would rather have a city council than the county Board of Supervisors decide the location and design standards for such units.

The incorporation issue has divided the Chamber of Commerce, an organization that in other communities has typically supported cityhood efforts.

The El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce board decided not to take a position. Lowery said some members, because of the nature of their companies, felt they should remain neutral, while some strongly favored cityhood and others were adamantly opposed.

The chamber commissioned separate analyses on affordable housing and the comprehensive fiscal analysis. The studies conclude that the city could meet housing and fiscal requirements in the long term, but recommend a conservative fiscal path for the first few years of cityhood.

Greg Jones, a spokesman for the incorporation campaign, questioned the motives of those opposing cityhood.

"I think as the campaign develops and you look at who is supporting incorporation and who is not, it will be evident that the opponents have their own financial interests or the interest of the county in mind, and not the people of El Dorado Hills," he said.

MEASURE P: El Dorado Hills incorporation

Proposal: To create a new city of El Dorado Hills. With 17,839 acres, an estimated 18,000 registered voters and a total assessed value of \$3.9 billion, it would become El Dorado County's third city, joining Placerville and South Lake Tahoe.

Arguments for: Keeps tax dollars in El Dorado Hills; funds improved services; makes government more accountable; provides local control over growth.

Arguments against: Uncertain fiscal viability; potentially higher taxes and fees; most growth decisions already made by county.

Election Day: Nov. 8.

About the writer:

- The Bee's Cathy Locke can be reached at (916) 608-7451 or clocke@sacbee.com.

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The Sacramento Bee, 2100 Q St., P.O. Box 15779, Sacramento, CA 95852
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