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Fire board fans flames

El Dorado Hills department takes stance against ballot measure for incorporation.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado Hills cityhood could jeopardize fire protection in that community and countywide, the agency charged with providing that protection says.

The El Dorado Hills Fire Department took that position Wednesday when its board of directors publicly opposed the ballot measure that would lead to incorporation.

Proponents of Measure P, the Nov. 8 ballot measure calling for El Dorado Hills' incorporation, had urged the directors to remain neutral if they are unwilling to endorse cityhood.

But at Wednesday's meeting, directors spoke out.

"It's been thrown in our laps," director Gary Costamagna said in making the motion to oppose Measure P. "It's not a situation where we can stay neutral."

Conditions of incorporation call for the Fire Department to remain an independent special district, regardless of whether El Dorado Hills becomes a city. But directors said they feared a future City Council might seek control of fire services.

"They were clearly defending their assets," incorporation spokesman Greg Jones said, while acknowledging the financially strong department's high level of service.

Jones said he was disappointed, considering incorporation proponents' request that the directors not take a position.

The board's action follows a resolution opposing Measure P by the department's employees union, the El Dorado Hills Associated Firefighters. That resolution says the fiscal analysis used to determine the city's viability is flawed and cites concerns that budget shortfalls could result in reduced services.

John Hidahl, a 22-year member of the Fire Department board, chairman of the El Dorado Hills Incorporation Committee and candidate for City Council if the incorporation vote passes, was the lone dissenter in the 4-1 vote to oppose Measure P.

Cityhood supporters cited the quality of service the Fire Department provides as an independent district, arguing that law enforcement and other services could be improved to a comparable level through incorporation.

County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn sided with cityhood opponents, arguing that municipal services will cost more than incorporation supporters estimate. The city would depend heavily on property tax revenue, he said, and development could suffer from rising mortgage rates and falling demand for new high-priced houses.

"If the city is going to be financially viable," Harn said, "a lot of new homes have got to be built."

Sheriff Jeff Neves said in a letter to the board that the fiscal analysis underestimated the cost of law

enforcement by basing projections on population growth rather than increases in salaries, health insurance, retirement and workers' compensation.

Incorporation proponent Harry Norris likened the initiative needed to create a new city to that which led to development of the 40-acre El Dorado Hills Community Park in 1987. That project also was opposed by people who questioned the cost and viability, he said.

"Where would we be today without that park?" Norris asked. "It defined El Dorado Hills. Now it's time to go the rest of the way."

Costamagna, a retired Sacramento County firefighter and administrator, said he opposes incorporation based on 35 years of public safety experience.

As a member of the El Dorado County Local Agency Formation Commission, which voted unanimously to put the cityhood measure before voters, Costamagna said he fought hard for incorporation terms and conditions that would protect the Fire Department. But he said he feared cityhood would hurt the El Dorado Hills Fire Department and rural departments countywide.

"It's a network of agencies helping each other out," he said. "I'm concerned about how it would impact our neighbors."

Board member Jim Hartley, a veteran of the Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District, said city fire services often don't receive the attention they deserve.

Hidahl pointed to conditions set by LAFCO to protect other agencies from being hurt by incorporation. "I have confidence in that provision," he said.

Director Moni Gilmore said the issue's divisiveness dismays her and claims she received threatening and intimidating phone calls because of her opposition to incorporation.

"I'm disappointed that the community that I love ... has become a hotbed of accusation," she said.

She said a cityhood supporter told her that directors who opposed incorporation would not again be elected to any board.

"Anyone who disagrees with the proponents shouldn't be threatened," she said.

Hidahl said he regrets the divisions that have developed, but incorporation is "an opportunity we cannot afford to pass up." He said he envisions a city of El Dorado Hills working as a partner with the county.

Board President Dennis Ferguson, however, characterized cityhood proponents' regard for the county as "absolute disdain" and said the idea of a city-county partnership has been abandoned by many incorporation supporters.

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