

THE CUYAMA VALLEY RECREATION DISTRICT

Toward A Brighter Future

INTRODUCTION

The 2013-14 Santa Barbara County Grand Jury received complaints concerning the capability and operation of the Cuyama Valley Recreation District. They allege that the district is not functioning in a manner that residents expect. Generally, the complaints involve the supervision, structure, limited number of activities as well as the business practices of the organization. In this report, the Grand Jury makes recommendations that can lead to a more capable organization and, as a result, an increase in community participation.

BACKGROUND

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District (CVRD) was formed in January 1957. According to the Santa Barbara County Assessor's Office, there are currently 1,226 parcels that are taxed to fund the district. The district estimates the population it serves at between 1,200 and 1,500 residents.

There are two small towns in the Cuyama Valley, Cuyama and its larger neighbor, New Cuyama. In 1952, the Atlantic Richfield Oil Company developed the town of New Cuyama, building housing and associated commercial businesses. Oil and gas production has now declined and the principal industry is once again agriculture.

METHODOLOGY

The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury (Jury) examined the CVRD's Operating Policies and Procedures, board meeting agendas and minutes, monthly newsletters, the 2012-13 annual financial report, and the March 30, 2013 Special District Compliance Report issued by the Santa Barbara County Auditor-Controller. The Jury interviewed complainants, CVRD board members, and the CVRD Recreation Director. The Jury also interviewed representatives of the Santa Barbara County Auditor-Controller's Office, the Santa Barbara County 1st Supervisorial District, the local school district, and the Cuyama Valley Family Resource Center. The Jury visited the facilities of the CVRD, Cuyama Valley Joint Unified School District, and reviewed photographs and documents provided by complainants.

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OBSERVATION AND ANALYSIS

Complainants say that, although the recreation district should be an important resource for their community, it is not providing services beyond the bare minimum. They claim coaches lack proper training, and in many cases untrained high school students serve as supervisors for younger children. The sports programs lack structure and continuity for all age groups. The community wants sports programs expanded to girls of all ages, basketball and flag football for younger children and T-Ball for Head-Start children. There is no soccer program, although there is alleged interest among parents to serve as coaches. The recreation district offers little else other than its few sports programs and, although it doesn't charge more than a minimal amount for its services, it cites money as the limiting factor for district programs and activities. In short, complainants say CVRD is not creating enough value for its residents and does not successfully enlist community support to create and manage a successful, self-sustaining recreation program.

Many with whom the Jury spoke believe the district could, in fact, enlist more support and expand its program offerings. They express the belief that the community has become disenchanted with the recreation district. Parents do not volunteer in great enough numbers to ensure successful team sports and too few volunteer at the recreation hall. Based on the interviews conducted by the Jury, the district seems to have lost much of its community support.

Additional complaints involve "open hall sessions" for youth, which consist of unstructured leisure time at the recreation hall. There is, apparently, a lack of adequate supervision. One complainant said fights are not uncommon.

It is common for other community groups to sponsor and supervise valley activities in the recreation district's recently renovated Montgomery Hall. The district provides the facility for holiday programs at Easter, Halloween, Christmas and the 4th of July, but other Cuyama Valley organizations, such as the 4-H Club, provide most of the support for these activities.

In fiscal year 2009-10, as property tax revenue declined, the district's total operating funds dropped to \$120,000. Projected revenues for 2013-14 are \$166,000, thanks in large part to increasing property valuations and the resulting tax assessment. In addition to parcel tax revenue, the district's current budgeted revenue includes:

- \$12,000 - Rentals (tables, chairs and the facility)
- \$ 4,800 - Bus Fares (district-owned bus)
- \$ 2,500 - Park and Recreation Fees

In conducting its investigation, the Jury requested documents that should have demonstrated that the board of directors and management were actively planning the work of the district. District policies require the Recreation Director to submit a "comprehensive recreational program" to the board one year in advance. The director admits that this is not done. The Jury also requested the district's strategic plan. Instead

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of a plan, the Jury received a vague wish list of items such as “purchase new equipment, hire new employees ... add new programs” that were mixed in with specific repairs such as a fence and the district’s recreation hall audio system.

The district does, however, have comprehensive Operating Policies and Procedures that outline the requirements of both board and the Recreation Director positions. This document, which is not dated, has apparently languished on the shelf and has neither been utilized nor updated for many years. For instance, the district's retirement plan has not been revised to reflect compliance with California's Public Employees’ Pension Reform Act of 2013, or PEPRA.

The district’s Operating Policies and Procedures clearly spell out that the board of directors is responsible for hiring, supervising, and evaluating annually the performance of the Recreation Director. To quote the policy, the board’s job is “to interview, select and employ the Recreation Director.” The Jury discovered that the board has neither established annual objectives for the director nor has it completed a formal performance appraisal in recent memory. “This is the county’s job,” said one board member. The board member wasn’t sure if the director is an employee of Santa Barbara County or of the recreation district. In fact, several of the board members were unaware that the director is required to report to the board.

The Recreation Director retired from full-time employment with the district in December 2011, but then immediately returned to work part-time. As a retired annuitant, pension regulations prevent the director from working more than 18.5 hours per week. This limitation appears to be a significant obstacle for the district. There hasn’t been a full-time staff presence since the director’s retirement nor is there currently an assistant Recreation Director.

The Jury believes it is essential for the board to manage the performance of the Recreation Director. Boards have a fiduciary duty to provide governance of an organization. It is difficult to see that this standard can be met if the board does not supervise the performance of the director through a performance appraisal process. District policies expressly state that a formal appraisal is required annually for all employees. The board should evaluate the director’s performance based upon the realization of goals that are developed mutually. It has a responsibility to supervise the director by establishing performance standards as called for in the Operating Policies and Procedures and make certain those performance standards are met.

The Operating Policies and Procedures also call for a “poll,” or survey of the community to ascertain its recreation needs and priorities. The Jury understands that this survey is to become the basis of the annual program submitted to the board. Currently, there isn’t a clear, written procedure for gathering community input.

In addition, the Jury finds several areas of concern:

Orientation

New board members do not receive orientation materials such as past meeting minutes, financial statements, bylaws, and the Operating Policy and Procedures so they can become familiar with the history and policies of the district. Part of an orientation should acquaint new directors with their responsibilities for governance. As previously mentioned, the operating policies appropriately list the responsibilities of both the Recreation Director and the board.

Fingerprinting

California law requires government organizations that work with children to conduct criminal offender background checks to help determine the suitability of a person applying for employment or a volunteer position. "Live Scan" is an automated digital fingerprinting system managed by the California Department of Justice as a way to search an individual's criminal history. The Cuyama Valley Recreation District does not currently conduct Live Scan fingerprinting as a means of screening potential employees and volunteers. Live Scan is available through the Santa Maria Police Department, the Santa Barbara County Sheriff's Office, and other law enforcement agencies.

Ethics Training

On October 2005, the Governor signed California Assembly Bill No. 1234, which requires public agency officials to receive training in ethics. Newly elected and appointed officials are required to receive this training within one year of assuming office. The CVRD board members and the Recreation Director were unaware of, and have not complied with, the ethics training required by AB 1234. Officials are required to receive this training every two years. The training must be at least two hours in duration and cover both general ethics laws and ethics principles. Free online training can be obtained from the California Fair Political Practices Commission website.

Training

There are other organizations that offer training to the board and to the district's management. One such organization, the California Special Districts Association, exists to "promote good governance and improve core local services through professional development." It offers inexpensive printed materials that can be useful in developing board and executive management skills. It holds regional workshops, seminars, webinars, and an annual statewide conference. The CVRD does not currently utilize this resource.

Another opportunity for training in the area of fitness and sports supervision is the California Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance. This organization also offers printed training materials as well as seminars and an annual conference. The Jury encourages the recreation district to seek additional training for its coaches.

Collaboration

There are other community organizations in the Cuyama Valley that provide services for youth and general recreation. The Jury found no evidence of structured, regularly scheduled meetings among these organizations to develop an organized effort to

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collaborate, avoid duplication, and address gaps in services. The Jury believes this is essential in a small community such as the Cuyama Valley.

Community Involvement

Very few community members attend CVRD board meetings. Perhaps this will change as the district becomes more responsive to the needs of the community. It is also troubling that the district has experienced short-tenured board members and has struggled to fill board vacancies. In short, more volunteers are needed to assist at all levels – to help coach and oversee programs as well as to serve on the district’s board of directors.

In addition, a successful, thriving recreation program needs the participation and financial support of the local business community. The district should also seek contributions from other sources including county government, service clubs, and foundations – both community and private.

CONCLUSION

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District is operating below its potential and what the community expects of a successful recreation program. As one long-time Cuyama resident observed wistfully, “Years ago, the district would rent a school bus and take kids to Magic Mountain for the day. The district sold tickets and paid the school district for use of the bus. Even something as simple as this no longer takes place.”

Although the district has limited finances, it typically charges only a token amount for sports and activities – for example, eight dollars for a season of football. According to many with whom the Jury spoke, this is a mistake. Residents said they would pay more for activities that had real value. More than one resident mentioned making the thirty-five mile trip to Taft for children’s sports programs that are “organized, fun, and fair.” In addition, there are few, if any, regularly scheduled activities for seniors and adults in general. There was a time when there was softball and other regularly scheduled adult activities.

The current Recreation Director is limited to an 18.5 hour work week and it is apparent this is not enough time to manage a recreation program effectively – particularly when there is no assistant director and too few volunteers. A full-time recreation director is needed.

In the last few months, the board has begun to review and update its long-dormant Operating Policies and Procedures. As it completes this process, along with much needed board and staff training, the Cuyama Valley Recreation District’s improvement will be well underway. The Santa Barbara County Grand Jury believes that this process can lead to a renewed sense of community enthusiasm for the recreation district and, as a result, toward a brighter future for recreation in the Cuyama Valley.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District Board of Directors does not review the performance of its Recreation Director annually as required by its policies and procedures.

Recommendation 1

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District Board of Directors formulate annual objectives for the Recreation Director so that a proper performance review can be conducted as soon as possible.

Finding 2

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District has not required employees or volunteers for positions having supervisory or disciplinary authority over minors to provide fingerprints and be screened for criminal background by the California Department of Justice, as required by California Public Resources Code section 5164 and California Penal Code section 11105.3.

Recommendation 2

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District require all employees and volunteers having supervisory or disciplinary authority over a minor, and all future applicants for such positions, to be fingerprinted through the Live Scan system and be screened for criminal background by the California Department of Justice.

Finding 3

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District Recreation Director currently does not submit a, written annual comprehensive recreational program plan as required by the district's Operating Policies and Procedures.

Recommendation 3

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District Recreation Director submit an annual comprehensive recreational program plan to the board as required by the district's Operating Policies and Procedures.

Finding 4

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District currently charges only a token amount for its recreation activities.

Recommendation 4

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District review the fee structure for recreation activities.

Finding 5

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District has not adequately trained board members, staff, or volunteers in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

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Recommendation 5

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District provide job descriptions and training for all board members, staff, and volunteers.

Finding 6

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District Board of Directors and staff have not completed required ethics training.

Recommendation 6

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District Board of Directors and staff immediately complete the requisite training in ethics.

Finding 7

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District has not adequately collaborated with potential community partners.

Recommendation 7

That the Cuyama Valley Recreation District institute meetings with all potential community partners to develop collaborative recreational programs.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933 and 933.05, the Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the enumerated findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit:

The Cuyama Valley Recreation District – 90 days

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7

Recommendations 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7

The Santa Barbara County 1st District Supervisor – No Response Required