

BY ANDREA ROOKS

Nipomo flirts with cityhood

Rural community waits for its financial report card before becoming a city

Sandwiched between the Five Cities and Santa Maria, Nipomo has until recently gone somewhat unnoticed. In the last five years, however, major developments have sprung up like so many eucalyptus trees along the rural mesa.

To get a handle on state-mandated development—which this year equated to 41 percent of the county's housing growth—Nipomo residents began looking into how to control their own destiny.

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Guy Murray, Nipomo Incorporation Committee

The ideal option: to cify—not in the dictionary sense of simply becoming urban, but to create the city of Nipomo.

In late April, the Nipomo Community Services District gave its blessing—and funding—for a consulting company to create a feasibility study examining whether the sandy mesa has a solid enough economic foundation to build a city on.

Between now and Labor Day, Sept. 1, when the Davis Co. said its preliminary report would be finished, Nipomo residents and council members will be holding their collective breath, educating the public, and formulating a Plan B.

If the financial analysis reveals that there isn't a broad enough tax base for Nipomo the city to emerge—sales tax being the main foundation for cities—all hope is not lost. The Nipomo Community Advisory Council (NCAC) has been tossing around the idea of becoming a Municipal Advisory Council.

Such a council, with more recognized power and funding from the County Board of Supervisors, would be another baby step toward local control, said former NCAC Chairman John Bowen.

"It's just a little more powerful for an unincorporated area. One potential is to have a financial budget where you can hire people like a manager or publicist—it's a halfway step between an

advisory council and a city council," he said, noting that there currently aren't any Municipal Advisory Councils in San Luis Obispo County.

Though Plan B is out there, most officials remain optimistic about Nipomo's future as a city.

Doug Jones, general manager for the Nipomo Community Services District—Nipomo's limited local government body—said that much of the needed revenue base is in the works.

"Old Town Nipomo is under construction," he said. "There's a fair amount of commercial development, which will make a great tax base for the new city."

According to Guy Murray, chair of the 4-year-old Nipomo Incorporation Committee, the state Board of Equalization reported that Nipomo's tax base is about \$80 per person. That also happens to be the amount recommended for an unincorporated area to have before it considers cityhood.

"We are better positioned financially now; 10 years ago we didn't have the tax base to become a city," Murray said. "We still may not ... but we're closer to feasibility than we ever have been."

For the past nearly 40 years, the Community Services District board has had jurisdiction over such services as water, sewer, drainage, and street-lighting for the rural area.

But issues close to Nipomo residents' hearts—namely land use and growth—remain in the hands of the 4th District County Supervisor Katcho Achadjian.

"Nipomo is probably the fastest growing place on the planet, certainly in San Luis Obispo County," Murray said. "We want to keep it rural and as small as possible and as well-planned as possible. Having other people make those decisions doesn't make sense."

For his part, Achadjian agrees. "A real plus is that they will make their own decisions. They will have a nucleus within themselves to have all five decision makers from within their community," said the supervisor, who also represents Arroyo Grande, south San Luis Obispo, and Oceano.

That's not to say the county isn't adequately looking out for its southern-

most community, he explained. "[Becoming a city] gives them their own identity: now they're known as a city," Achadjian said, noting that city representatives would also have seats on the SLO Council of Governments, the Air Pollution Control Board, and other countywide agencies.

"Now, all of that is concentrated on me representing their needs and fighting for their needs. At that time, they will have both me and elected officials," he said. "More voices."

The flip side to having more voices is that the city of Nipomo would also have to accept more responsibility.

"They will celebrate their successes and be blamed for their failures," Achadjian said, "and not be pointing their finger at the county."

Instead of malcontent or wronged parties suing the county for errant decisions, the local Nipomo government would take the financial fall. But, the supervisor continued, like a teen-ager anxious to own his own car, the budding city must grow into its desired independence.

And like that teen-ager, Nipomo would also have to grow into its expenses. A city manager, police and fire services, the library, appointed commissioners—all those positions and services would become the city's to maintain.

Plus, part of obtaining financial feasibility includes having the ability to pay for those services before becoming a city. It's not a legal option to raise taxes immediately after city limits become established.

If the Davis Co. report comes back with a financial go-ahead and proposed boundaries, the county's Local Agency Formation Commission would conduct its own, more-thorough report.

If cityhood still looks workable, pub-

PHOTO BY CHRISTOPHER GARDNER



CITY LIMITS Nipomo lawyer Guy Murray heads up the Nipomo Incorporation Committee, which has been studying how to make the fast-growing rural area a city since 1999.

lic workshops would precede a vote of the people. When they cast their yeas or nays, they'd also vote for city council members so the new city would be up and running as soon as possible after an official tally. The whole process could take several years.

Meanwhile, Nipomo's governing county official asks everyone to get involved and to be careful.

"Like taking medicine, it might have side effects," Achadjian said. "They need to ask all the right questions, listen to the consultants, and do their homework."

"If they pull the community behind them, I'll be there to support them." Δ

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