STAFF REPORT

SUBJECT: REVIEW AND APPROVE DISTRICT'S RESPONSE TO THE SAN MATEO COUNTY GRAND JURY REPORT: CAN WE SEE YOU NOW? SAN MATEO COUNTY'S INDEPENDENT SPECIAL DISTRICTS WEBSITE TRANSPARENCY UPDATE

Board of Directors of Coastside Fire Protection District:

Recommendation:

It is recommended that the Board review the draft response to the Grand Jury Report which have been prepared by staff and provide direction as needed to finalize the response. Staff will then complete the response and submit it.

Background and Discussion:


As noted in the Report:

In 2014, the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury issued a report concerning the lack of transparency in the websites of the 23 independent special districts operating within San Mateo County (County). The jury at that time offered seven recommendations designed to improve transparency and achieve adherence to standards set forth by the California Special Districts Association (CSDA) and the Special District Leadership Foundation (SDLF).

The 2016-17 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) reinvestigated the transparency of the County’s 22 independent special district websites and determined that many districts have made overall, substantial improvement.
Fire Board  
Meeting of July 26, 2017  
Page 2

The Report indicates that:

The Grand Jury believes the transparency of a district’s website influences the perception of the work performed by board members and employees of the County’s independent special districts. Taxpayers are best served when they know who administers their independent special districts, from where the districts derive their funding, how the money is spent, how the actual work of the districts is conducted, and ultimately, how the districts impact them as citizens.

The Report indicates that since issuing its 2013-2014 report, Coastside Fire Protection District was only one (1) of six (6) special districts awarded the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence.

The SDLF also awards independent special districts the District of Distinction Accreditation for those districts that demonstrate prudent fiscal practices along with other areas important to effectively operate and govern a special district. The 2013-14 Grand Jury found that no district had achieved, applied for or been awarded the District of Distinction Certificate. The Report indicates that during the past three (3) years Coastside Fire Protection District, along with two (2) other independent special districts in San Mateo County, applied for and received this distinction.

**Proposed Response to Recommendations**

The Grand Jury Report contains five (5) Findings and three (3) Recommendations. Because Coastside Fire Protection District has obtained both the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence and the District of Distinction Certificate, it has been directed to respond to only Recommendation 2.

With this direction in mind, staff proposes the following response to Recommendation 2:

**R2.** All independent special districts shall take the necessary steps to maintain their websites using the current standards set by the Special District Leadership Foundation so as to provide pertinent information to their constituents and to continue to qualify for the *District Transparency Certificate of Excellence*

**Response:** Respondent Coastside Fire Protection District agrees with this recommendation.
Conclusion

With Board direction staff will complete the District's response, obtain the President's signature and submit the response to the Grand Jury report.

Attachments:


Respectfully submitted,

JEAN B. SAVAREE
District Legal Counsel
ATTACHMENT 1

GRAND JURY REPORT
ISSUE

In 2014, the San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury issued a report concerning the lack of transparency in the websites of the 23 independent special districts operating within San Mateo County (County).¹ The jury at that time offered seven recommendations designed to improve transparency and achieve adherence to standards set forth by the California Special Districts Association (CSDA) and the Special District Leadership Foundation (SDLF). This report will discuss the progress made since 2014 by the County’s independent special districts and serve as an update to the initial report.

SUMMARY

In FY 2014-15, the 22 independent special districts² that currently serve San Mateo County provided various services for approximately 747,000 residents and received over $107,000,000³ in tax dollars. Special districts provide many essential services but, according to Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association,⁴ residents often do not know who manages their districts, how funds are provided and allocated, or the full extent of the services provided by a district.⁵

Each of the 22 independent special districts in San Mateo County operates a website designed to provide pertinent information to its constituents.⁶ Californians value the importance of transparency in government at all levels. Transparency in a governance context demands honesty, openness, and accountability for all functions and responsibilities. Designing and maintaining transparency on websites serves to inform the public as well as document effective use of their tax dollars.

The 2016-17 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) reinvestigated the transparency of the County’s 22 independent special district websites and determined that many districts have made overall, substantial improvement. About one-third of the County’s independent special districts, however, still do not meet the minimum standards for transparency.

² Los Trancos Water District was dissolved in 2015, reducing the number of independent special districts from 23 to 22.
⁶ Appendix A
BACKGROUND

Special districts have been a part of California’s landscape for over 130 years. They are a form of local government created by a community to meet a specific local need. A special district is a local governmental agency authorized by state law to provide governmental services such as sewer, water, fire protection, recreation, healthcare, police protection, mosquito and vector control, and other services. There are three main types of special districts: (1) county-governed special districts which are governed by a Board of Supervisors and operated by counties; (2) city-governed special districts that are governed by their respective city councils and operated by such cities; and (3) “independent special districts” that have their own governing boards which are either elected by the district’s voters or appointed by the various city councils. Special districts are defined as “any agency of the state for the local performance of governmental or proprietary functions within limited boundaries.” Legislation has provided special districts with some of the basic powers afforded to counties and cities, including the power to impose certain taxes, issue revenue bonds, and levy fees and assessments.

Currently, there are approximately 2,109 independent special districts in California. San Mateo County has 22 independent special districts, which provide a variety of services to the residents of the county.

The Special District Leadership Foundation (SDLF) is a nonprofit 501(3)(c) organization and an affiliate of the California Special Districts Association (CSDA). The SDLF’s mission is “to promote and recognize excellence in the governance and management of special districts.”

The SDLF Board is made up of nine members: three directors appointed by the CSDA, three directors appointed by the Special District Risk Management Authority (SDRMA) and three public members selected by majority vote of the designated directors. CSDA and SDRMA appoint their designated representatives to the SDLF Board every four years.

The CSDA is also a nonprofit 501(3)(6) organization which brands itself “the voice for all special districts, providing members with the resources necessary to best serve their communities.”

Both SDLF and CSDA provide advocacy, personal development, and training programs in special district governance, transparency, and excellence to the staffs of special districts throughout the state.

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9 Ibid.
10 Appendix A
11 info@sdlf.org Accessed 3/20/17

2016-2017 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury
The SDLF awards the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence to those independent special districts whose websites comply with a specific set of criteria. The Certificate is awarded for a two-year period after which a district must apply for recertification.

**METHODOLOGY**

To maintain continuity, the Grand Jury reapplied the website transparency checklist created by the SDLF which was utilized by the 2013-14 Grand Jury in their evaluation. That checklist is divided into two tiers. To achieve the SDLF District Transparency Certificate of Excellence all of the following twelve items in Tier 1 must be easily accessible on the website as well as at least four of the items in Tier 2:

**Tier 1**

- Names of board members and their terms of office
- Name of general manager and key staff along with contact information
- Election procedure and deadlines
- Board meeting schedule
- District’s mission statement
- Description of district’s services/functions and service area
- Authorizing statute
- Current district budget
- Most recent financial audit
- Archive of board meeting minutes for at least the past six months
- List of compensation of board members and staff and/or link to California state controller’s webpage with the data

**Tier 2:**

- Post board members’ ethics training certificates
- Picture, biography and email address of board members
- Last three years’ audits
- Reimbursement and compensation policy
- Financial reserves policy
- Online/downloadable Public Records Act Request form
- Audio or video recordings of board meetings
- Map of district boundaries/service area
- Link to California Special Districts Association mapping program
- Most recent Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence studies

Upon completion of the review of the websites in March 2017, the Grand Jury sent follow-up letters to those special districts whose sites lacked required Tier 1 components or whose websites lacked at least four components of Tier 2. All of these districts responded.
DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury believes the transparency of a district’s website influences the perception of the work performed by board members and employees of the County’s independent special districts. Taxpayers are best served when they know who administers their independent special districts, from where the districts derive their funding, how the money is spent, how the actual work of the districts is conducted, and ultimately, how the districts impact them as citizens.

The 2013-14 Grand Jury found that no independent special district in the County had received the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence (DTCE).

The review by the 2016-17 Grand Jury of the County’s independent special districts’ websites reveals that the majority of independent special districts in the County have markedly improved their websites. As a result, the following six independent special districts have applied for and been awarded the DTCE since 2014:

Highlands Recreation District 2014-2016
North Coast County Water District 2014-2016
Peninsula Healthcare District 2015-2017
Coastside Fire Protection District 2016-2018
San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District 2016-2018
Westborough Water District 2016-2018

Additionally, the Grand Jury’s review of independent special district websites revealed that eight additional special districts have websites that would qualify for the DTCE but appear not to have applied for the certificate.\textsuperscript{15} Those districts are:

Coastside County Water District
Granada Community Services District
Menlo Park Fire District
Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space
Montara Water and Sanitary District
Sequoia Healthcare District
SMC Resource Conservation District
West Bay Sanitary District

\textsuperscript{15} www.sdlf.org, 4/19/17
In addition to the 14 special districts listed above, one other special district’s website, Woodside Fire Protection District, fulfilled all of the first tier required components, bringing to 15 the number of independent special districts in the County that have fulfilled all of the first-tier required components.

The SDLF also awards independent special districts the District of Distinction Accreditation for those districts that demonstrate prudent fiscal practices along with other areas important to effectively operate and govern a special district. The 2013-14 Grand Jury found that no district had achieved, applied for or been awarded the District of Distinction Certificate. However, during the past three years three independent special districts in San Mateo County applied for and received this distinction: Coastside Fire Protection District, North Coast County Water District, and San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District.\(^{16}\)

All of these districts deserve positive recognition for their hard work achieving much needed transparency for their constituents through district websites.

Seven independent special districts, however, currently have not met an acceptable level of transparency.

The San Mateo County Harbor District’s website lacks only one component to complete Tier 1, a description of their election process. The district’s website currently provides a link to the San Mateo County Elections website, but the District’s website lacks any detail regarding the District’s internal procedure for elections.\(^{17}\)

The following independent special districts require components in both tier 1 and/or tier 2 to achieve the SDLF’s District Transparency Certificate of Excellence:\(^{18}\)

- Bayshore Sanitary District
- Broadmoor Police Protection District
- Colma Fire Protection District
- East Palo Alto Sanitary District
- Ladera Recreation District
- Mid-Peninsula Water District
- San Mateo County Harbor District
- Woodside Fire Protection District

\(^{16}\) www.sdlf.org, 4/19/17
\(^{17}\) www.smharbor.com, 5/16/17
\(^{18}\) See Appendix C
FINDINGS

F1. Six independent special districts have completed the requirements and been awarded the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence designation from the Special District Leadership Foundation over the past three years.
   - Coastside Fire Protection District
   - Highlands Recreation District
   - North Coast County Water District
   - Peninsula Healthcare District
   - San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District
   - Westborough Water District

F2. Eight additional independent special districts have completed the requirements and been awarded the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence.
   - Coastside County Water District
   - Granada Community Services District
   - Menlo Park Fire District
   - Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space District
   - Montara Water and Sanitary District
   - San Mateo Resource Conservation District
   - Sequoia Healthcare District
   - West Bay Sanitary District

F3. Three independent special districts have achieved the District of Distinction Designation from the Special District Leadership Foundation over the past three years.
   - Coastside Fire Protection District
   - North Coast County Water District
   - San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District

F4. Fifteen independent special districts have websites meeting the first tier of required components.
   - Coastside County Water District
   - Coastside Fire Protection District
   - Granada Community Services District
   - Highlands Recreation District
   - Menlo Park Fire District
   - Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space District

2016-2017 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury
. Montara Water and Sanitary District
. Northcoast County Water District
. Peninsula Healthcare District
. San Mateo County Mosquito and Vector Control District
. San Mateo County Resource Conservation District
. Sequoia Healthcare District
. West Bay Sanitary District
. Westborough Water District
. Woodside Fire Protection District

F5. Eight independent special districts websites have not met the Special District Leadership Foundation’s minimum requirements.
. Bayshore Sanitary District
. Broadmoor Police Protection District
. Colma Fire Protection District
. East Palo Alto Sanitary District
. Ladera Recreation District
. Mid-Peninsula Water District
. San Mateo County Harbor District
. Woodside Fire Protection District

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The eight independent special districts’ websites that do not conform to the current standards set by the Special District Leadership Foundation’s transparency checklist shall conform to the accepted criteria on or before December 31, 2017.

R2. All independent special districts shall take the necessary steps to maintain their websites using the current standards set by the Special District Leadership Foundation so as to provide pertinent information to their constituents and to continue to qualify for the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence.

R3. The eight independent special districts that qualify for the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence are strongly encouraged to apply for it to be recognized for their efforts.
REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

From the following governing bodies:

Recommendation 1
Bayshore Sanitary District
Broadmoor Police Protection District
Colma Fire Protection District
East Palo Alto Sanitary District
Ladera Recreation District
Mid-Peninsula Water District
San Mateo County Harbor District
Woodside Fire Protection District

Recommendation 2
All independent special districts in San Mateo County

Recommendation 3
Coastside County Water District
Granada Community Services District
Menlo Park Fire District
Mid-Peninsula Regional Open Space
Montara Water and Sanitary District
Sequoia Healthcare District
SMC Resource Conservation District
West Bay Sanitary District

The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that the comment or response of the governing body must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.
# APPENDIX A INDEPENDENT SPECIAL DISTRICT WEBSITES

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Special District</th>
<th>Website</th>
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<td>Bayshore Sanitary District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.bayshoresanitary.org/">http://www.bayshoresanitary.org/</a></td>
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<td>Broadmoor Police Protection District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.broadmoorpolice.com/">http://www.broadmoorpolice.com/</a></td>
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<td>Coastside County Water District</td>
<td><a href="http://coastsidewater.org/">http://coastsidewater.org/</a></td>
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<td>Coastside Fire Protection District</td>
<td><a href="http://www.coastsidefire.org/">http://www.coastsidefire.org/</a></td>
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<td>Colma Fire Protection District</td>
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APPENDIX B

District Transparency Certificate of Excellence checklist
Showcase your district's commitment to transparency

BASIC REQUIREMENTS

☐ Current Ethics Training for all Board Members
  (Government Code Section 38233)
  □ Provide copies of training certificates along with date completed

☐ Compliance with the Ralph M. Brown Act
  (Government Code Section 54950 et. al.)
  □ Provide copy of current policy related to Brown Act
    compliance
  □ Provide copy of a current meeting agenda (including
    opportunity for public comment)

☐ Adoption of policy related to handling Public
  Records Act requests
  □ Provide copy of current policy

☐ Adoption of Reimbursement Policy, if district provides
  any reimbursement of actual and necessary expenses
  (Government Code Section 53232.2-40)
  □ Provide copy of current policy

☐ Annual disclosures of board member or employee
  reimbursements for individual charges over $100 for
  services or products. This information is to be made
  available for public inspection. "Individual charge"
  includes, but is not limited to: one meal, lodging for
  one day, or transportation. (Government Code Section
  3305.5)
  □ Provide copy of the most recent document and how it is
    accessible

☐ Timely filing of State Controller's Special Districts
  Financial Transactions Report - includes compensation
  disclosures. (Government Code Section 33891)
  □ Provide copy of most recent filing
  SDLF staff will verify that district is not listed on the
  State Controller's non-compliance list

☐ Conduct Annual Audits
  (Government Code section 26499 and 26499.6)
  □ Provide copy of most recent audit and management letter and
    a description of how/where documents were made available
    to the public

☐ Other Policies - have current policies addressing the
  following areas (provide copies of each)
  □ Conflict of Interest
  □ Code of Ethics/Values/Norms or Board Conduct
  □ Financial Reserve Policy

WEBSITE REQUIREMENTS

☐ Maintain a district website with the following items:
  (provide website link, all are required)
  □ Names of Board Members and their terms of office
  □ Name of general manager and key staff along with contact
    information
  □ Election procedure and deadlines
  □ Board meeting schedule [Regular meeting schedule must be posted
    72 hours in advance pursuant to Government Code Section
    54954.2 (a)]
  □ District's mission statement
  □ Description of district's services, functions, and service area
  □ Authorizing statute/enabling act (Public Law or Special Act)
  □ Current district budget
  □ Most recent financial audit
  □ Archive of Board meeting minutes for at least the last 6 months
  □ List of compensation of Board Members and staff and/or link to
    State Controller's webpage with the data

☐ Website also must include at least 6 of the following items:
  □ Past Board Member ethics training certificates
  □ Picture, biography and email address of board members
  □ Last 5 years of audits
  □ Reimbursement and Compensation Policy
  □ Financial Reserve Policy
  □ Online/Downloadable Public Records Act request form
  □ Audio or video record of board meetings
  □ Map of district boundaries/service area
  □ Links to California Special Districts Association mapping program
  □ Most recent Municipal Service Review (MSR) and/or a photo of
    influence (SDL) studies (full document or link to document on another site)

Continued on reverse

Questions about SDLF or the transparency program? Call us for more information at 916.231.2939

2016-2017 San Mateo County Civil Grand Jury 10
# APPENDIX C  TRANSPARENCY CHECKLIST

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Issued: June 19, 2017
ATTACHMENT 2

PROPOSED RESPONSE TO GRAND JURY REPORT
July ____, 2017

Honorable V. Raymond Swope
Judge of the Superior Court
Hall of Justice
400 County Center, Department 23
Redwood City, CA 94063

Dear Judge Swope:

The Coastside Fire Protection District Board has had an opportunity to review the 2017 Grand Jury report entitled “CAN WE SEE YOU NOW? San Mateo County’s Independent Special Districts Website Transparency Update.” The District Board after reviewing the report and allowing for public comment at its regular Board meeting on July 26, 2017 offers the following response to Recommendation 2 as directed in the report:

Response to Recommendations

R2. All independent special districts shall take the necessary steps to maintain their websites using the current standards set by the Special District Leadership Foundation so as to provide pertinent information to their constituents and to continue to qualify for the District Transparency Certificate of Excellence

Response: Respondent Coastside Fire Protection District agrees with this recommendation.

Respectfully submitted,

Gary Burke
President, Coastside Fire Protection District

Cc: Grand Jury Foreperson
c/o Court Executive Office
400 County Center
Redwood City, CA 94063-1655