

Ballot tabulation begins for Vector Control special assessment

Contributed by Elizabeth Larson
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LAKEPORT ‐ After a month and a half of balloting countywide, it's all over but the counting for the Lake County Vector Control District's proposed property assessment.

At the end of a special district board meeting held early Tuesday afternoon in the Board of Supervisors chamber at the county courthouse in Lakeport, the election officially closed.

County Registrar of Voters Diane Fridley ‐ accompanied by her deputy, Maria Valadez ‐ came into the board chambers at the meeting's end, took possession of a large silver ballot box, counted the five ballots inside and took it back to her second-floor office.

She later issued a count of ballots returned so far to her office. The results will now be tabulated.

Those ballots, which included the five Fridley collected at the meeting, total approximately 14,295 out of 42,784 mailed out in May, for a 33-percent return rate.

About two-thirds of the ballots were returned in May, in the weeks after the district's consultant send the ballots out by mail.

John Bliss, vice president of the Bay Area-based SCI Consulting Group ‐ hired by Vector Control to handle the assessment ‐ said Lake County's is one of the highest ballot return rates for a county of its size that the firm has seen in its 26-year history.

Similar assessments conducted in Glenn and Colusa counties had return rates in the low 20-percent range, Bliss said.

The firm reported issuing 100 replacement or corrected ballots, and taking several hundred phone calls about ballots.

District officials are asking for the assessment, which will add an estimated \$500,000 to their \$1.3 million budget.

The district has spent \$126,000 on the assessment effort, including hiring SCI Consulting Group ‐ which has worked on similar assessments for other vector control districts around the state ‐ and mailing and publishing the ballots, District Manager Dr. Jamie Scott told Lake County News on Tuesday.

Most single-family dwellings can expect to pay an additional \$13.96 on their yearly property tax if the assessment is approved.

The results of the ballot tabulation will be announced at a special Vector Control Board of Trustees meeting scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Tuesday, July 15, at the district's offices at 410 Esplanade in Lakeport.

About 15 people ‐ of which only about half a dozen were citizens and not district members or consulting staff ‐ attended Tuesday's hour-and-a-half-long meeting, which included a required public hearing under Proposition 218 since an assessment is proposed.

A few county residents in particular strenuously questioned the reasons for the assessment and criticized what they felt was a flawed process, complete with ballots which ‐ in one man's case ‐ showed his assessment would be close to nine times its actual amount.

Scott said they've been working on the assessment process since March of 2008, when “it became apparent that we had a funding problem at this district.”

She said the district loses 20 percent of their funding to local redevelopment and the Education Revenue Augmentation Fund (ERAF).

“Since this agency's primary goal is protecting public health, we were getting to a point where we would no longer be able to do that effectively or efficiently” with the staff they have, said Scott.

She assured community members that the assessment has strong protections and can only be used for local mosquito and vector control operations.

Lake County's health officer, Dr. Karen Tait MD, expressed her appreciation to both Scott and the district for partnering with the county to protect public health against disease.

She said the agency has been a “vital source” for dealing with vector-borne illness.

“We have enjoyed very low rates of disease,” said Tait, who reported that in 2008 the county had no human cases of West Nile Virus, one case of Rocky Mountain spotted fever and three Lyme disease diagnoses.

Witter Springs resident Dan Berdechowski grilled district officials about their budget and spending, and how district trustees are appointed.

He questioned why the first assessment estimate for his 10-acre parcel was \$57, when it should have been \$6 plus 12 cents per acre. He received a reassessment of \$29 before he finally received a ballot with the right amount.

Bliss and fellow SCI Consulting staffer Maria Garcia-Adarve explained that the incorrect assessments on Berdechowski's ballots had resulted from incorrect data they received from the county.

Berdechowski also questioned why the hearing was held so late in the process, and said his reading of the state finance law Proposition 218 doesn't say the hearing has to be held at the end of balloting period.

The state Legislative Analyst's Office analysis of Proposition 218, passed by voters in 1996, requires that the government agency asking for the assessment hold a public hearing after mailing the notices. At the conclusion of that hearing, the ballots must be tabulated.

Upper Lake resident Betsy Cawn said she wanted to see more public education about the district, and complained about the assessment being allowed to increase by as much as 3 percent annually, an adjustment tied to the San Francisco Bay Area Consumer Price Index.

Bliss, in helping respond to questions, explained that “no one likes to stick their hand out,” noting that the board debated the issue for more than a year, and spoke about the issue to local publications, government boards,

homeowners associations and community groups.

He suggested to the board that the responsible thing is not to assess the full 3-percent increase, and only implement it when needed.

Cobb resident Ron Fidge was concerned about numerous things, from the reasons for the assessment to concerns for bats, which eat mosquitoes.

Scott explained that while bats do eat mosquitoes, that's not the preferred source for the nocturnal critters, which like a broad array of foods, including gnats – which tend to cluster in large groups – and larger insects like moths.

Fidge was concerned that more attention should be placed on Lyme disease, and Scott agreed that the tick-borne disease is a big issue for the county.

Scott said between 2 and 5 percent of the ticks Vector Control tests are positive for Lyme disease. There also are other tick-borne diseases of concern, but the district's testing abilities are limited, and the assessment would help expand lab capabilities.

“That's a very important part of this,” she said.

Anna Ravenwoode of Kelseyville told the board that the best and most successful route for vector control is community education. She asked what the education component would be under the new assessment, and how the district would monitor the reduction in new disease and infections.

Scott said education and outreach for personal protection will be part of a comprehensive program.

Outreach, she said, already has been stepped up above its historical levels and going forward it will include taking part in more public events like fairs and visits to school classrooms.

She didn't offer a monetary amount that would go specifically toward education.

As for monitoring reduction in new disease, Scott said, “Our best longterm indicator will be how we protect the human population here.”

At the end of the meeting, Phil Murphy, the district's newest trustee, said he wanted the public record corrected as it relates to statements about how rigorously the board debated the assessment. He said he only saw it agendized once in the district's minutes over the last year.

Murphy and the rest of the board have had disagreements over the proposed assessment, which were elaborated on in letters they exchanged in Lake County News and other local publications over the last week.

Murphy questioned the need for the additional funds and asked if the district had attempted to look at any option other than the assessment.

In response, fellow board members said he had failed to outline his concerns to them during district board meetings and incorrectly stated information about the district. He, in turn, shot back with a letter earlier this week accusing the district of losing sight of its primary function and becoming an example of bigger and more entrenched government.

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