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Voters To Determine SB County Split

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Published Monday, May 22, 2006

[Issue 128](#) / [Volume 86](#)

This June 6, Santa Barbara County citizens will decide whether to support Measure H, which if passed would split the county in two.

The long-running feud between the mostly agricultural north and more urban south half of the county may be settled as Measure H goes to the ballot. If passed, the northern half of the county would split from Santa Barbara County and rename itself Mission County.

Third District Supervisor Brooks Firestone said he and 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal wrote a ballot argument against Measure H.

"It became the unanimous letter of the board," Firestone said of the argument.

Originally, 4th District Supervisor Joni Gray and 5th District County Supervisor Joe Centeno supported the split and signed the petition to get the measure on the ballot, Firestone said. But the final report from the Mission County Formation Review Commission, a group appointed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, swayed Gray and Centeno's opinion.

According to the report, the new county could suffer from a \$30,000,000 annual revenue deficit during the next 10 years.

"This was a reversal of their original position," Firestone said. "The facts have come out in the commission study, and the facts are so compelling, they changed their position."

However, Jim Diani, chair of Citizens for County Organization, Inc., said his organization supports the split and, regardless of the commission's report, does not think a new county would be in such dire straits. He said the year template the report was based on was biased due to irregular statistics of that year, and the deficit may not be as large.

"Our goal is to try and educate the people and give them a positive perspective on the split," Diani said. "Everything we thought before is still there; the \$30 million deficit is a risk, but we're \$7 million ahead today, and they used a 2002-2003 template when they did the study. We're willing to say maybe we should take this deficit."

Diani also said he is disappointed that the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors took an official stand against the issue.

"I think it's a tough issue for them," Diani said. "I'd have preferred to see them back off, but they have decided to take a position, which is fine, but it's a hot topic."

Santa Barbara County Action Network Executive Director Mary O'Gorman said her organization opposes Measure H. O'Gorman said she is glad the supervisors unanimously agreed to oppose the split because she thinks their support will help defeat the measure.

"I believe that ultimately, it will be defeated," O'Gorman said. "The report that was done last year said the split would be too costly and the new county would be in debt. People are concerned between the fiscal uncertainty and the environmental uncertainty; people don't want to take risks like that right now."

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O’Gorman said SBCAN has been working to educate the public on the measure’s facts and reminding its members to vote “No” on the measure.

“We did forums and then we sent out an e-mail to all our members to remind them to vote,” O’Gorman said.

Firestone said he thinks Measure H will fail because there has been no organized campaign in support of the split.

According to a recent UCSB survey of residents in Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties , 9 percent of Santa Barbara County residents favored the split, and 49 percent opposed it, while 42 percent abstained. North county residents were more likely to oppose the measure than south county residents.

Diani said Citizens for County Organization, Inc. has not organized to promote Measure H because the group wants voters to go to the polls uninfluenced by outside forces. Regardless of whether the measure passes, Diani said, he is content that the group started a debate about the split.

“We haven’t done any fundraising and we’re not doing an active media campaign,” Diani said. “Putting signs up and trying to convince people is not the way. ... [Voters] need to do it for the right reasons.”

O’Gorman said she wants to see UCSB students more involved in county politics and encourages students to vote.

“The UCSB student body used to be such a significant force in county politics, and nowadays, with Internet, it’s so easy to get informed,” O’Gorman said. “Really, what it comes down to is, your vote is your voice, so use it.”

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