Facilitating Conservation

Western Shasta Resource Conservation District

Summary

The Western Shasta Resource Conservation District (WSRCD), a special district formed in 1957, operates with the stated mission to “Collaborate with willing landowners, government agencies and other organizations to facilitate the conservation and restoration of Western Shasta County’s natural resources.” The district encompasses approximately 1.7 million acres bounded on the east by the watershed divide between eastern and western Shasta County; the north by the Siskiyou County line; the west by the Trinity County line; and the south by the Tehama County line.

Through its investigation the Grand Jury determined that while the WSRCD is now facing the same financial difficulties as most special districts, it is still effective in accomplishing its mission. We did find areas where the benefit to the citizens of Shasta County could be enhanced by (1) adding additional members to the Board of Directors, (2) selectively pursuing “fee for service” contract work, and (3) updating its website. We have made specific recommendations with regard to each of these issues.

Background

California Penal Code section 925 grants authority to the Grand Jury to review the operations of special districts such as the WSRCD. The local media recently publicized both the financial difficulties confronting special districts within Shasta County in general and the specific activities of the WSRCD. As it has been ten years since the Grand Jury reviewed the operations of the district, we elected to conduct an extensive review of both the financial operations and the effectiveness of the WSRCD in accomplishing its stated mission.

Approach

The Grand Jury:

- interviewed four past and present WSRCD Board members;
- interviewed three past and present WSRCD employees;
- attended two WSRCD Board meetings;
- attended an information workshop on conservation easements co-hosted by the WSRCD;
- reviewed the regulations under which the WSRCD operates;
reviewed the WSRCD Board of Directors’ meeting agendas, and the minutes of those meetings, covering a six month period;

reviewed the past three annual audits summarizing the finances of the WSRCD;

reviewed an awarded grant proposal covering the period January 1, 2012 through June 30, 2013 by which inmate labor has been provided to the District through Sugar Pine Conservation Camp and Cal-Fire;

toured the WSRCD facility in Anderson;

toured a WSRCD job site in Shasta Lake City;

discussed with a representative from Cal-Fire the work of the WSRCD.

Discussion

During our investigation of the WSRCD the Grand Jury found the District to be an important resource for the citizens of Shasta County. The WSRCD provides essential information and assistance to those citizens seeking fuel reduction, watershed management and erosion control activities. We learned at a Board meeting and through interviews that a number of fuel reduction sites worked by WSRCD had been used or considered for use as staging areas for fire fighting activities.

The Grand Jury was impressed by both the expertise and the dedication of the members of the Board of Directors and the employees interviewed. The Grand Jury did, however, find areas where the benefits available through the District could be enhanced. Those areas concerned the internal workings of the Board of Directors, the continued financial stability of the District in years to come, and the imparting of information to the public on the WSRCD website.

The Grand Jury began its investigation of the WSRCD by conducting a series of interviews as listed above. We also toured a WSRCD work site location where we viewed fuel reduction work being performed by inmates from the Sugar Pine Conservation Camp east of Redding.

Our interviews with members of the WSRCD Board of Directors, as well as our review of the regulations under which the District operates, confirmed that the Board is allowed to have as many as nine members. Each member is appointed to a four year term by the Shasta County Board of Supervisors. As we began our investigation there were four members on the Board. Since that time an additional member has been added. Having only four members on the board presented difficulties for the WSRCD both with regard to potential “tie” votes and quorum requirements. It also presented difficulties in setting up sub-committees in which no more than two Board members could be present so as to avoid violating the Brown Act. This issue was well recognized by the Board members with whom we spoke. Appointing more members to the Board would allow for greater Board member participation in sub-committees and the infusion of new ideas.
Our interviews with members of the Board and current employees confirmed that the District has, in recent years, experienced increased difficulty in securing grant money for many of its proposed projects. Our review of the financial reports pertaining to the District supported what we were told. While there has been a decrease in the amount of grant money awarded the District, it has nevertheless been able to continue its work in fuel reduction, watershed management, and erosion control. The District also continues its outreach to the local community through programs such as the Student Restoration Project (Outreach of students, grades 4 thru 12 from various schools working on a variety of restoration projects such as planting native shrubs and trees) and by co-sponsoring informational seminars on land conservation easements. The WSRCD has “partnered” with Cal-Fire to utilize inmate labor from the Sugar Pine Conservation Camp at a cost of $200 to $225 per crew (15 to 17 workers) per day. Through its use of inmate labor, the District has been able to minimize its labor costs while obtaining the services of highly skilled individuals trained in fire prevention and fire suppression activities.

The Grand Jury learned that a majority of the revenue received by the District is derived from state and federal grants. Only a small percentage of its revenue is derived from private landowner “fee for service” contracts. No monies are received from local tax assessments. As such, the District faces the same financial difficulties that many special districts face in hard financial times. Up to this point the WSRCD has been reluctant to “market” its ability to enter into “fee for service” contracts with private landowners out of concern that it would be perceived as competing with the local business community. While the Grand Jury considers this position to be a relevant concern, various options could be considered. As is the case with many service organizations which provide assistance to the public, the WSRCD could selectively contract with private landowners in those instances where the local business community is either unable or uninterested in providing such assistance.

The WSRCD maintains a website for the purpose of informing the public as to the nature of its operation and the availability of conservation resources. The website is extensive but out-of-date. A majority of the “links” on the website fail to “forward” individuals to the appropriate site. In addition, many of the website pages refer to activity which was last updated in 2004, 2006, or 2007.

The website contained conflicting information as to the dates and times of the WSRCD Board meetings. While the meetings of the Board were noted on the website calendar, other information contained within the website provided conflicting information as to when those meetings were to be held. On occasion, meetings of the Board were changed to a different date or time without those changes being noted on the website. In addition, neither the agendas nor the minutes of those meetings were available on the website. Updating the website would provide the public with additional information and would thus be an effective means to further the mission of the WSRCD.

Findings

F1. Additional members added to the Board of Directors would allow for a greater diversity of opinion in the operation of the district and would reduce difficulties in setting up sub-committees due to constraints imposed by the Brown Act.
F2. Marketing the availability of the resources of the WSRCD to the public on selected “fee for service” projects would both promote resource conservation and assist the District in meeting its financial obligations.

F3. Inmate labor from the Sugar Pine Conservation Camp is the most economical way for the WSRCD to obtain experienced and qualified labor at minimal cost while working on selected projects.

F4. The WSRCD website is out-of-date and fails to provide the public with necessary information.

Recommendations

R1. The Grand Jury recommends that the WSRCD seek out interested citizens in order to nominate them to the Shasta County Board of Supervisors for appointment to the board. This should be accomplished within the next three months.

R2. The Grand Jury recommends that the WSRCD review its practice of not marketing “fee for service” contracts with a view toward performing such services for private landowners who would not otherwise avail themselves of conservation work on their property. This review should be undertaken as soon as possible following the addition of new members to the Board.

R3. The Grand Jury recommends that the WSRCD continues to utilize (through Cal-Fire) inmate labor from the Sugar Pine Conservation Camp as a means of obtaining experienced and qualified labor while at the same time keeping down the cost of services provided.

R4. The Grand Jury recommends that the WSRCD review and update its website for the specific purpose of providing the public with accurate, relevant and timely information concerning its activities and the dates, times and agendas of the WSRCD Board meetings. The review and update of the website should be completed within three months (the committee feels that 3 months is adequate.).

Requested Responses

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933.05 the Grand Jury requests that:

The Board of the WSRCD is requested to respond to Findings F1, F2, F3 and F4 as well as to Recommendations R1, R2, R3 and R4 within 90 days.