



# Municipal Service Review

COUNTY SERVICE AREA NO. 135

FINAL

REPORT SUMMARY | May 2020



## General Themes and Conclusions

CSA No. 135 serves two distinct municipal roles on behalf of the County of San Diego and a considerable portion of its constituents. The first and initial role of CSA No. 135 was established at the time of its formation in 1994 to provide enhanced public safety radio communications in the unincorporated area as well as in participating incorporated communities in San Diego County (Carlsbad, Del Mar, Encinitas, Imperial Beach, Lemon Grove, Poway, San Marcos, Santee, Solana Beach, and Vista). This involved establishing the governmental means to create a dedicated funding mechanism to support a regional communication system and in doing so sync otherwise incompatible radio systems among first-responders. It was similarly expected the County and affected cities would establish a fixed fee within their jurisdictions to directly fund the regional communication system through CSA No. 135. However, the subsequent passage of Proposition 218 (1996) and requirement to

receive voter approval for new fees changed direction and only three member agencies – Del Mar, Poway, and Solana Beach – proceeded to establish fixed fees for CSA No. 135; the remaining member agencies fund the regional communication system through general fund monies. The result is a substantive deviation in CSA No. 135's implementation given only three of the eleven member agencies directly fund the resulting 800-megahertz public safety radio system operated by Regional Communication Systems through a District fixed fee.

While CSA No. 135's role in providing public safety radio communications has decreased in scale relative to initial formation expectations the opposite applies to the District's functions with respect to fire protection and emergency medical services. These integrated functions were established in 2008 as part of a LAFCO-approved latent power activation and corresponded with the creation of the

## » General Themes and Conclusions

County Fire Authority and produces an internal service zone covering close to two-thirds of the District boundary. The expansion CSA No. 135 followed an earlier recommendation by LAFCO by way of two earlier Commission reports on reorganizing fire protection in the unincorporated area titled “Macro” and “Micro” as well as the County’s responding document titled as the “Hybrid Plan.” The Hybrid Plan directly informed the County in proceeding with an application subsequently approved by LAFCO to utilize CSA No. 135 as the governance means to organize and fund fire protection and emergency medical services in the unincorporated area over three distinct steps. All three steps in the Hybrid Plan have been completed and the County Fire Authority is now the successor to 18 former fire service agencies and/or companies. The County also has memorialized its commitment to providing fire services through a voter-approved amendment to the County Charter in November 2018 by formally adding the County Fire Authority as an organizational unit.

A review of CSA No. 135 relative to San Diego LAFCO’s growth management tasks and interests as prescribed under statute produces five central themes or conclusions. These conclusions collectively address the availability, need, and adequacy of CSA No. 135 services. The conclusions are independently drawn and sourced to information collected and analyzed between 2014 and 2018 and detailed in the agency profile.

### No. 1

#### Two Distinct and Separate Municipal Roles

Two distinct municipal roles comprise CSA No. 135 and divided between (a) public safety radio communications and (b) integrated fire protection and emergency medical services. These two roles are separately organized within the County of San Diego and other than sharing enabling powers through CSA No. 135 have no substantive connection with one another in terms of administration, budgeting, and operations.

### No. 2

#### Different and Reduced Role in Public Safety Radio Communications

CSA No. 135 was initially formed in 1994 to organize and directly fund public safety radio communication system throughout the District’s jurisdictional boundary and on behalf of 11 member agencies. CSA No. 135’s direct funding of public safety radio communications, however, has diverged and is limited to only three member agencies – Cities of Del Mar, Poway, and Solana Beach – to date. The other eight member agencies in CSA No. 135 fund the associated services through other discretionary resources outside the intended role of the District.



The San Elijo Lagoon in Cardiff-by-the-Sea



San Diego County  
Administration  
Center Building

» General Themes and Conclusions

**No. 3**  
**Expanding Role in Fire Protection and  
Emergency Medical Services**

CSA No. 135 has been successful in fulfilling its role to organize and fund fire protection and emergency medical services in the unincorporated area through the County Fire Authority following LAFCO’s approval of a latent power activation in 2008. This includes completing all three steps in the County’s Hybrid Plan and marked by serving as successor to 18 merged fire agencies and/or companies and in doing so becoming first responder for approximately 70% of the unincorporated area. The role of the County Fire Authority has also expanded beyond initial formation expectations and now a formal commitment under the County of San Diego Charter.

**No. 4**  
**Positive Financial Standing**

The County of San Diego – which is fiducially responsible for CSA No. 135 and its municipal functions – improved its financial standing during the five-year report period as measured by its audited net position with an overall 42.7% increase less pension obligations. This improvement is also reflected and aided by an average total margin of 4.7% over the corresponding 60-month period. Further, while decreasing by (6.5%), the County’s funded ratio – i.e. the portion of pension assets to pension liabilities – finished the period favorably relative to industry standards at 78%.



Potato  
Chip Rock  
in Poway

**No. 5**  
**Merits to Reorganize and Establish a  
New Fire Protection District**

The distinct and separate municipal roles within CSA No. 135 suggest there is sufficient merit to pursue a reorganization of the District to formally separate into two entities and further sync its active service activities with current and future demands. The preferred option involves reorganizing CSA No. 135 to divest its fire protection and emergency medical service powers and concurrently form a new dependent fire protection district governed by the Board of Supervisors to serve as successor agency.



## Recommendations

The following recommendations call for specific action either from San Diego LAFCO and/or CSA No. 135 based on information generated as part of this report and outlined below in order of their placement in Section 5.0 (Written Determinations). Recommendations for Commission action are dependent on a subsequent directive from the membership and through the adopted work plan.

1. San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with the County of San Diego and SANDAG to develop buildout estimates specific to CSA No. 135 and for its two distinct service areas – public safety radio communications and fire protection/emergency medical services – and incorporate the information into the next scheduled municipal service review.
2. San Diego LAFCO should perform additional review to fully determine the scale of qualifying disadvantaged unincorporated community lands adjacent to CSA No. 135 that are not already within the boundary of fire protection provider. This additional review appropriately satisfies statutory prompts and should be incorporated into future municipal service reviews as needed.
3. San Diego LAFCO should coordinate with CSA No. 135 and assess the present and future role of the District in meeting all participating agencies' needs specific to its public safety radio communications function. This includes assessing whether other participating agencies are interested in establishing a fixed District fee and evaluating thereafter the merits/demerits of boundary adjustments.
4. The distinct and separate municipal roles within CSA No. 135 suggests a reorganization of the District to formally separate into two entities and further sync its active service activities with current and future demands is appropriate at this time.
5. San Diego LAFCO believes the preferred reorganization option involving CSA No. 135 is to divest its fire protection and emergency medical service powers and concurrently form a new dependent fire protection district to serve as successor agency.
6. County of San Diego should proceed with a proposal request to San Diego LAFCO to reorganize CSA No. 135 as provided above and with the incentive of a fee waiver.
7. San Diego LAFCO should proceed and update CSA No. 135's sphere with no changes and in doing so satisfy its planning requirement under G.C. Section 56425.



Lake Hodges in  
Poway, CA