



The Sphere

JOURNAL OF THE CALIFORNIA ASSOCIATION
OF LOCAL FORMATION COMMISSIONS

The Chair's Corner

Shaping CALAFCO's Next Chapter

Finding Our Voice Together

Reflections on CALAFCO's March 2025

Communications Workshop

Charting a Stronger Future for Felton Fire

*How Santa Cruz LAFCO's Governance Options
Report is Helping a Small District Meet Big
Challenges*

October 2025

A CALAFCO Publication | CALAFCO.org

Board of Directors

Gay Jones, *Chair*

Wendy Root Askew, *Vice Chair*

Yxstian Gutierrez, *Treasurer*

Josh Susman, *Secretary*

CENTRAL REGION

Gay Jones, *Sacramento LAFCO*

Anita Paque, *Calaveras LAFCO*

COASTAL REGION

Wendy Root Askew,
Monterey LAFCO

Virginia Chang-Kiraly,
San Mateo LAFCO

NORTHERN REGION

Paul Minchella, *Modoc LAFCO*

Nancy Ogren, *Siskiyou LAFCO*

Josh Susman, *Nevada LAFCO*

SOUTHERN REGION

Yxstian Gutierrez,
Riverside LAFCO

Steve Sanchez, *Riverside LAFCO*

CALAFCO Staff

José Henríquez, *Outgoing
Interim Executive Director &
Executive Officer*

Michelle McIntyre, *Incoming
Interim Executive Director*

Shannon Costa, *Deputy
Executive Officer*

Tyler Salcido, *Deputy
Executive Officer*

Joe Serrano, *Deputy
Executive Officer*

Paula de Sousa, *Legal Counsel*

Jeni Tickler, *Consulting
Administrator*

THANK YOU TO OUR ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

GOLD ASSOCIATE MEMBERS



SILVER ASSOCIATE MEMBERS

- Assura Software
- Berkson Associates
- Chase Design, Inc.
- The City of Rancho Mirage
- County Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles
- Cucamonga Valley Water District
- David Scheurich
- DTA
- E Mulberg & Associates
- Economic & Planning Systems (EPS)
- Emergency Services Advisors, Inc.
- Goleta West Sanitary District
- Griffith & Masuda, PC
- HdL Coren & Cone
- Hinman & Associates Consulting
- Holly Owen, AICP
- Kennedy Water Consulting
- LACO Associates
- LZH Consulting LLC
- Platinum Strategies Inc.
- Policy Consulting Associates
- P. Scott Browne
- QK
- Rancho Mission Viejo
- Sloan Sakai Yeung & Wong, LLP
- South Fork Consulting, LLC
- Terranomiccs
- TS Civil Engineering
- Webb Municipal Finance, LLC

Articles, announcements, comments or other materials noteworthy to LAFCO commissioners and staff, may be submitted to the Editor at info@calafco.org or call 916-442-6536. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of CALAFCO, its members, or their professional or official affiliations. ©2025 CALAFCO. All rights reserved. For permission to reproduce any article in this publication, contact info@calafco.org.

A Look Inside

04 **The Chair's Corner**
Shaping CALAFCO's Next Chapter

06 **Looking Ahead**

07 **Partners in Progress**

08 **Finding Our Voice Together:**
Reflections on CALAFCO's March 2025 Communications Workshop



14 **Resilient by Design**
Modern Tools for Every
Size Commission

18 **CALAFCO Regional/
Board Restructuring
Working Group**

20 **CALAFCO Mentorship
Program**

22 **Charting a Stronger
Future for Felton Fire**



The mission of CALAFCO is to promote efficient and sustainable government services based on local community values through legislative advocacy and education.



The Chair's Corner:

Shaping CALAFCO's Next Chapter

By Gay Jones, CALAFCO Chair

CALAFCO is not the same organization it was a year ago, and that is a good thing. Change has required us to ask hard questions about who we are as an Association, what we offer our Members, and how we prepare for the future. As your Chair, I view this not as a setback, but as an opportunity to sharpen CALAFCO's focus and strengthen the connections that bind us together.

Serving on a Fire District Board has shown me firsthand how wildfires cross jurisdictional boundaries. When one community is in danger, the entire region is at risk. The same principle applies to our work at CALAFCO: **our strength comes from a network of LAFCOs supporting each other, not from isolated efforts.**

Whether the issue is fire protection, water supply, or growth management, collaboration is vital—it is not optional.

Looking ahead, our Board will be tackling important questions: How should our Bylaws adapt to reflect today's Membership? What is the right balance of regional representation on the Board?

And as we prepare for future legislation, how do we ensure every LAFCO's voice is heard? These aren't just technical exercises; they are decisions that will shape CALAFCO's relevance for years to come.

This work will succeed only if it reflects the energy and ideas of our members. Engagement doesn't always mean joining a committee (though we welcome that, too). It can be as simple as reaching out to a peer LAFCO, sharing your lessons in this very publication, or encouraging a new commissioner to get involved. Each of these actions strengthens CALAFCO.

The challenges facing local government will not get easier. But I am optimistic because I see CALAFCO evolving into a more engaged, connected, and resilient Association.

Together, we are not trying to return to where we were. We are building something more substantial, for each other and for the communities we serve.

Where We've Been

By José C. Henríquez, Outgoing Interim Executive Director, CALAFCO

Let's be honest; this past year has been challenging. I don't say that to ask for pity, to be snarky, or to chastise anyone. It's simply the truth. The difficulties were felt by the LAFCOs that remained, those that left, the Board, and the Transition Team (Pamela, Steve, Jeni, and me).

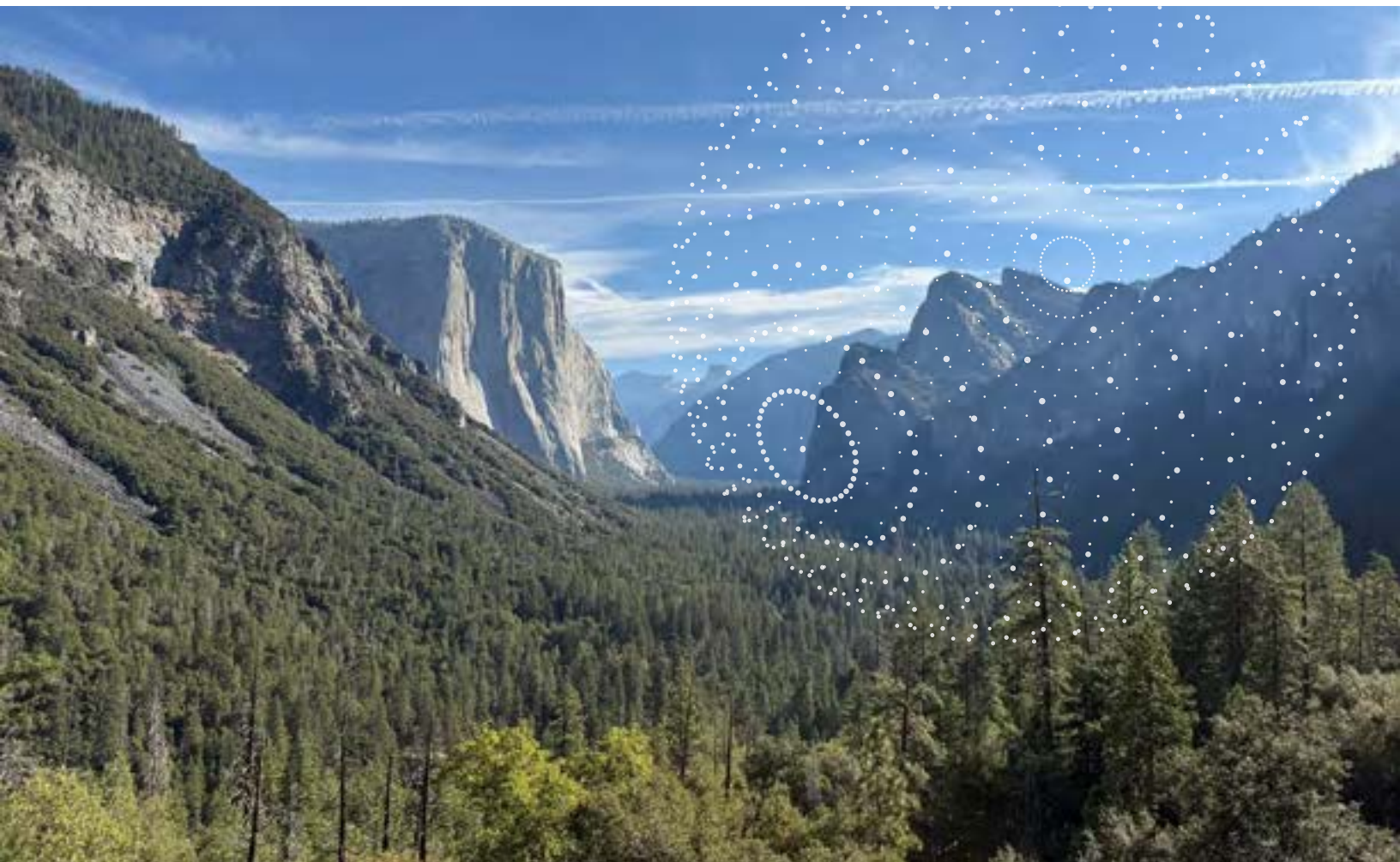
And yet, recognizing those challenges should also inspire a deep sense of pride.

Together, we've achieved significant progress in rebuilding the Association.

I am deeply grateful for the patience shown by our Members, for the Regional Officers past and present, for the many volunteers who dedicated their time and effort, and for every LAFCO that kept communication lines open regardless of Membership status.

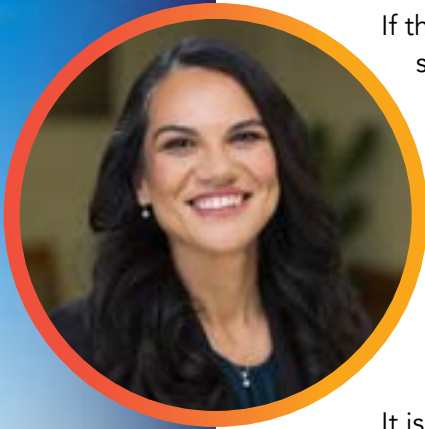
I thank the Board for trusting me, and above all, I am thankful for the partnership of Pamela, Jeni, and Steve.

Looking ahead, I am eager to see how Michelle's stewardship and energy will shape CALAFCO and what the new Transition Team will accomplish in taking the Association to the next level. And while my role is shifting, you have not seen the last of me. I remain committed to assisting as CALAFCO EO to the best of my ability.



Looking Ahead

By Michelle McIntyre, Incoming Interim Executive Director, CALAFCO



If this year has taught us anything, it's that CALAFCO's greatest strength is not just in its structure, but in the people who continue to show up, contribute, and believe in the value of collaboration. Even as several LAFCOs have chosen to step away earlier in the year, many of those same LAFCOs remain engaged. They are registered for our upcoming Conference and continue to welcome CALAFCO staff to their meetings. That speaks volumes: our relationships are resilient, and CALAFCO's value is recognized even beyond formal membership.

It is against this backdrop of resilience that I step into the role of Interim Executive Director on November 1, 2025. Over the years, I've had the privilege of working with many of you, and I've seen firsthand the dedication, camaraderie, and professionalism that make our LAFCO family so special. These experiences inspire me as I begin this new chapter with CALAFCO.

Thanks to the steady leadership of José Henríquez as Interim Executive Director, and the commitment of the Board, Transition Team, and Regional Officers, CALAFCO has regained its footing. CALAFCO-U sessions are once again bringing us together to learn and grow. Updated policies are giving us a stronger framework. And the Legislative Committee has returned to providing a unified voice in Sacramento.

Of course, there's still work to do. Rebuilding trust and enhancing the Association's value will require ongoing effort. Nevertheless, the momentum is real. My goal is to help CALAFCO serve as a steady guide during this time, while encouraging more opportunities for collaboration, learning, and shared success.

To everyone: Board Members, Associate Members, staff, and Commissioners of every LAFCO, I want to thank you.

Your patience, dialogue, and ongoing engagement have helped CALAFCO navigate a tough period and prepare us for the future. A future centered on strengthening our connections, amplifying CALAFCO's voice, and continuing to show the value we offer not only to each other but also to the communities we serve.

I look forward to connecting with you at the Conference and rolling up our sleeves together as we chart CALAFCO's next chapter.



Partners in Progress

Finding Our Voice Together:

Reflections on CALAFCO's March 2025 Communications Workshop

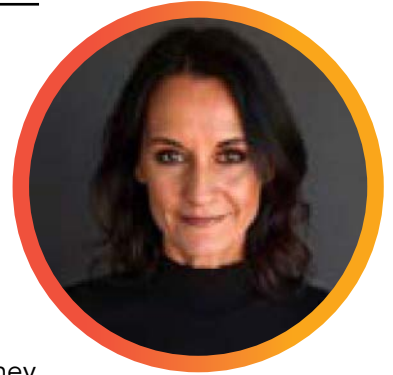
By Erin LaCombe, CEO & Founder, CV Strategies

When CALAFCO leaders gathered this March for our statewide communications workshop, it was clear from the start that we were stepping into more than just a training session. We were stepping into a moment of transition defined by both challenge and opportunity.

This reflection is admittedly personal for me. I have been a CALAFCO Associate Member for more than a decade, and I truly understand the power and promise of this organization. Nearly 20 years ago, I founded CV Strategies with the belief that communications could transform how public agencies connect with the communities they serve. Today, our team has the privilege of representing LAFCOs across California and seeing firsthand how CALAFCO helps its members grow stronger, more responsive, and more effective. That perspective has only deepened my appreciation for CALAFCO's role in shaping efficient and sustainable governance and in supporting those who serve their communities every day.

What emerged over the course of two days was not only a roadmap for improved messaging, but also a deeper sense of shared purpose among Board Members, Regional Officers, and all participants.

The workshop led by Pamela Miller of Miller Consulting Group was designed to strengthen communication and collaboration across CALAFCO.



As a facilitator, I was reminded yet again that facilitation is everything. The process of guiding dialogue, asking questions, and creating space for honest reflection is not a simple task. It is, in fact, the work. And yet, it is in this work that breakthroughs occur. Each exercise, whether a SWOT analysis of our communications strengths and weaknesses or the collective drafting of key message statements, required hard work and a willingness to lean into discomfort. The CALAFCO leadership team did just that, with humility and focus.

The Board's engagement was especially encouraging. Rather than sitting back, members actively participated, sharing candidly where communication has fallen short and offering constructive ideas for building trust, confidence, and transparency. Their involvement set a tone that invited others to do the same. Participants' contributions underscored CALAFCO's unique strength: a statewide network of practitioners who balance policy with practice, carrying decades of institutional and community knowledge.

Together, we tackled some of CALAFCO's most persistent communication challenges. We acknowledged where clarity and consistency have been lacking and began building the framework for a more unified approach. We discussed the need to foster two-way communication with our members, ensuring that CALAFCO not only delivers information but also listens and responds. We explored how to adapt our messaging more effectively in times of crisis and how to ensure that trust remains the foundation of everything we communicate. These conversations were not always easy, but they were always worthwhile.

There was also joy in the room, rooted in the collaborative spirit of CALAFCO and the shared belief in the value of this organization.

Personally, working alongside Pamela Miller was a highlight for me. Pamela brought a steady hand, a thoughtful perspective, and a genuine warmth to the facilitation process. Her deep understanding of CALAFCO, combined with her ability to blend structure with empathy, made her a trusted partner throughout. The collaboration reminded me that while facilitation requires skill, it also requires heart.

I am equally grateful for the CV Strategies team, who embody the same values of service and collaboration that CALAFCO represents. Their behind-the-scenes support, ideas, and energy made this workshop even better and ensured the work will continue long after.

The outcomes of the workshop are significant. Out of this hard work will come two foundational tools: a Communications Code of Conduct and a Communications Framework.

The Code of Conduct will guide how we, as CALAFCO leaders, communicate with professionalism, respect, transparency, and consistency. It will be both a compass and a commitment, and a reminder that how we say something is often as important as what we say.

The Communications Framework, meanwhile, will provide structure and guidance.

It will identify our key messages, define our channels, establish crisis protocols, and ensure we have feedback mechanisms in place.

These tools will strengthen CALAFCO's voice, align our leadership, and increase our value to members.

But beyond the documents and frameworks, perhaps the most important outcome was the shared experience itself.

There is something powerful about sitting in a room together, grappling with questions, and emerging with a common understanding. It builds trust. It fosters respect. And it reminds us that CALAFCO's strength lies not only in the resources we provide, but also in the relationships we nurture.

As I reflect on those two days in March, I am filled with gratitude for the openness of the participants, the wisdom of the Board and Regional Officers, Pamela's partnership, and the willingness of everyone to do the hard work. Transition is never easy, but it is necessary. And when we embrace it together, with humility and determination, it becomes a source of renewal.



Ultimately, facilitation is not about leading people to a predetermined outcome. It is about creating conditions for people to discover the outcome together. That is what we experienced in March. And that is why I believe CALAFCO's future is bright. We are finding our voice. And with that voice, we will continue to serve our members with humility, stewardship, and dedication.

As we move forward, I am thankful for the chance to contribute to this important work. Supporting CALAFCO's leadership through this period of transition is a responsibility and a privilege, and I look forward to the progress that lies ahead.

SCV Water Improves Local Groundwater Quality

With Support from DWR Grant Programs Treatment Facilities Restore Water Affected by PFAS

By SCV Water, yourscvwater.com/PFAS

Dedicated to providing clean water to its customers, Santa Clarita Valley Water (SCV Water), located in Los Angeles County, is addressing PFAS contamination through the construction of treatment facilities to restore groundwater quality in the Santa Clarita Valley (SCV). Like many communities throughout the nation, traces of long-lasting synthetic chemicals, per- and

polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS), have seeped into water supplies. These chemicals can cause a myriad of negative health effects through repeated exposure.

SCV Water partners with the California Department of Water Resources (DWR), utilizing grant programs that

fund local activities and projects aimed at improving water quality, ensuring water supply reliability, and promoting groundwater sustainability in the SCV.

Since 2020, SCV Water has constructed four PFAS treatment facilities, two of which received State grant funds:

- **Santa Clara and Honby Wells PFAS Treatment Facility** – Completed in 2024, SCV Water received a \$3 million grant to restore groundwater supplies through the treatment of two wells, providing enough water to serve 1,700 families annually.
- **T&U Wells PFAS Treatment Facility** – With anticipated completion in December 2025, SCV Water has received a little over \$1.5 million to restore groundwater supplies through the treatment of three additional wells, providing enough water to serve 5,000 families annually.

To date, SCV Water has been awarded \$11.6 million from the State for PFAS treatment projects, with \$4.5 million awarded outright and \$7.13 million from a revolving grant fund that subsidizes water quality projects.

To ensure success when building a grant application, SCV Water tailors each application to align with the respective requirements of each grant, thoroughly reviewing them to guarantee compliance.

Simple tip: *Grants submitted even a minute after a deadline will not be considered, so the Agency also submits its applications on time.*

At the core of SCV Water's successful grant writing is the art of storytelling. In its applications, the Agency highlights the project's importance, detailing its positive impact on the local community and environment. Applications also discuss the consequences for the service area should the project not receive funding. Letters of support from the community, including city officials, legislators, and environmental groups, further strengthen the narrative of the project's necessity and enhance the application.

SCV Water has six other PFAS treatment projects in the planning or design phase. Over \$225 million in capital improvement project costs are estimated at the full buildout of PFAS treatment facilities in the SCV, with anticipated annual operations and maintenance costs of \$12-15 million. Because building treatment plants can be very costly, anticipating future expenses allows SCV Water to better prepare and take advantage of grant funding opportunities that help make these projects more affordable.



From Excel to Excellence:

Strengthening LAFCO Processes Together

By Ryder Ross, Founder, CivicBound, civicbound.com

On a Tuesday morning in a LAFCO office somewhere in California, a spreadsheet is open on one screen, and a to-do list of sticky notes litters the desk. The spreadsheet lists every active change of organization application, MSR/SOI update, and special project, along with dates, statuses, and notes. It's familiar territory for staff and, although commissioners rarely see it, the information in that spreadsheet quietly shapes the decisions they make. Excel has served many LAFCOs well. It's flexible, inexpensive, and easy to format. But, as the number of projects grows, deadlines begin to overlap, and staff transitions occur, a spreadsheet alone can start to feel stretched.

In many offices, deadlines and procedures live mostly in the memories of long-serving staff. That experience is invaluable, but it is also vulnerable to change. Documenting "how we do it," and pairing that with reminders or notifications tied to key statutory dates, creates a safeguard. Even modest improvements, whether that's an operations manual, refinements to a tracking spreadsheet, or the adoption of digital project management tools, make it easier for staff and commissioners alike to see the whole picture.

The strongest systems go beyond simply holding data. They reduce errors, cut down on duplicate work, and provide a single "source of truth" so staff can coordinate seamlessly. For commissioners, these systems ensure that the materials they receive are accurate, timely, and complete—a critical requirement when actions must follow the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act's varying and specific timelines.

Some LAFCOs have already taken steps to document and standardize their procedures. Fresno LAFCO, for example, developed a robust operations manual. It's more than a binder of checklists: it's a living roadmap that ties each step directly to statutory requirements, with links to the document templates needed for that step.

This kind of resource not only helps staff remain consistent but also gives commissioners confidence that proposals are handled transparently and predictably.

Fresno's operations manual is among the most comprehensive I've seen, but even there, staff recognize the value of pairing strong documentation with digital tools. Fresno is working with CivicBound, an online project management system designed specifically for LAFCOs, to build upon the foundation established in their manual. The fact that a LAFCO with such well-established procedures sees value in implementing a digital system underscores a broader lesson: even the best internal guides can benefit from reminders, centralized access, and tools that facilitate easier collaboration.

The goal isn't to discard tools that work, but to make sure they can carry the weight of the work ahead. A spreadsheet may be the tool of choice today, but as technology evolves, so do the opportunities to manage proposals in ways that are clearer, more accessible, and more resilient. Some commissions are beginning to explore integrated systems that combine tracking, communication, and document access into a single platform like CivicBound. Others are strengthening their existing spreadsheets with structured procedures to back them up.

However it's done, the aim is the same: accurate, timely, and transparent information that supports effective governance. By maintaining a single source of truth, making project status visible to all who need it, and capturing institutional knowledge, LAFCOs can ensure its processes remain strong, ready to meet deadlines, adapt to change, and maintain public trust for years to come.





Setting the Bar: Why Performance Measures Belong in Every MSR

By Amanda Ross, South Fork Consulting, southforkconsulting.com

When Rocklin's population surpassed 72,000, the question wasn't just how big the city had become; it was whether public services were keeping pace. Could police respond quickly enough? Were dispatchers meeting state standards for answering 911 calls? Was the city planning for infrastructure needs?

These questions are central to every Municipal Service Review (MSR). However, too often, MSRs depend on broad narrative statements or agency assurances instead of clear, measurable benchmarks. That's why Placer LAFCO's recent MSR for the City of Rocklin is notable; it used consistent performance measures across 32 service areas, providing commissioners with data to make informed decisions.

The results presented a balanced picture. Rocklin scored "above average" on 21 measures and "average" on nine. For example:

- **Police Dispatch:** 95.38% of 911 calls were answered within 15 seconds, just above the CalOES standard of 95%.
- **Police Staffing Levels:** Rocklin maintains 0.89 officers per 1,000 residents, similar to neighboring agencies, but still short of meeting long-term demand.
- **Infrastructure Planning:** The City has clear strategies for replacing facilities, vehicles, and equipment on a regular cycle.

This information was displayed in a table format with clearly identified icons, allowing for a quick visual cue of the adequacy, or not, of each performance measure. Instead of vague statements, commissioners could clearly identify where Rocklin was meeting standards and where service levels might fall short in the future.

Why Benchmarks Matter

The Rocklin case highlights a broader truth: performance measures transform MSRs from simple reports into practical tools for accountability and strategic planning.

Without benchmarks, comparisons across agencies or even from one MSR cycle to the next may seem subjective. With benchmarks, LAFCOs provide a consistent method for evaluating service quality, thereby fostering public trust in the process.

Imagine if every LAFCO adopted a standard set of benchmarks in its local policies. These could include:

- Agency maintains a published reserve fund policy.
- Stormwater and drainage infrastructure replacement is planned and funded.
- Fire staffing meets the standard of three firefighters per engine.
- Local water demand is monitored and integrated into drought contingency planning.

These standards wouldn't eliminate local nuances, but they would establish consistency across reviews and enhance the credibility of LAFCO's findings. Commissioners could monitor trends over time, while agencies would understand in advance what expectations they will be evaluated against. This format also allows agencies to make preemptive changes towards good governance.

Moving Forward

MSRs are more than just a statutory requirement; they are a commitment to communities that growth will not outpace the provision of essential services. Rocklin's review demonstrates how benchmarks lend credibility to that promise by basing decisions on evidence rather than anecdotes.

As LAFCOs look ahead, establishing performance measures as a matter of local policy would ensure that every MSR is not only a snapshot in time but also a roadmap for the future. Benchmarks transform service reviews into dynamic documents, tools that highlight both achievements and gaps, and incorporate accountability into our planning for growth.

With clear standards, LAFCOs can lead the way in showing that "adequate services" is more than a phrase in statute: it's a measurable goal, and one worth championing.

Key Takeaways

- **Benchmarks Build Confidence:** Comparing to peer cities or national standards makes findings more defensible and easier to explain.
- **Continuity Counts:** Standardized metrics allow commissioners to track agency performance over time, even when staff or consultants change.
- **Flexibility is Key:** Core measures and local context create consistency to guide final conclusions.
- **Better Communication:** Dashboards or tables of key indicators help commissioners and the public quickly see how services measure up.



Resilient by Design:

Modern Tools for Every Size Commission

By Hamish Howard, Managing Director/CEO, Assura Software
assurasoftware.com/LAFCO

For decades, LAFCOs have relied on whatever resources they had, including spreadsheets, binders, sticky notes, and a great deal of institutional memory, to meet the changing and increasing demands of not just CKH but CEQA, the Brown Act, and other laws that impact them. These tools served their purpose, but anyone who has had to dig through old project folders, policy binders, or depend on a single person's memory knows how easily deadlines can be missed or records can become inconsistent. As calls for greater transparency and accountability grow, LAFCOs of all sizes are feeling the pressure to accomplish more with fewer resources.

A Shared Solution for Smaller LAFCOs

Smaller LAFCOs often operate with limited staff and tight budgets. In 2022, CALAFCO conducted a biennial survey that included responses from 51 LAFCOs. The survey revealed that nearly 30 percent of these LAFCOs rely on contract consultants for staffing, while an additional 12 percent use a combination of consultants and staff. Additionally, 37 percent of LAFCOs have fewer than two full-time equivalent employees. It was also found that nearly 57 percent handle five or fewer projects each year. For these LAFCOs, which typically manage only a few proposals annually, the pressure to meet all requirements and statutory deadlines can be overwhelming.

To address this challenge, CALAFCO partnered with Assura Software to develop a shared, cloud-based workflow system designed explicitly for smaller LAFCOs. Input was collected from El Dorado, Shasta, San Joaquin, and Marin LAFCOs to create this tool, which guides staff through each step of the process, ensuring deadlines and requirements are met. For a single-staff office, this kind of support can provide significant peace of mind.

Scaling Up: Lessons from San Diego

Larger LAFCOs are also recognizing the value of these tools. In 2024, San Diego LAFCO became the first to implement a fully customized version of the platform. Assistant Executive Officer Priscilla Mumpower notes that it "streamlines proposal management and keeps the executive team updated on all ongoing proposals." Executive Officer Keene Simonds emphasizes that, in a hybrid work environment, digital systems are "an investment in bridging the communication gap to help ensure proposals are proceeding as intended." Their experience demonstrates that technology isn't just about efficiency, it's about keeping teams aligned and work progressing smoothly.

Why This Matters to All LAFCOs

Regardless of size, every LAFCO faces similar pressures. The CKH Act is complicated. New requirements from the Brown Act, CEQA, and other laws impacting LAFCOs continue to arise and evolve. Communities expect more transparency and accessibility than ever. And all of this comes as budgets tighten and staff capacity is stretched thin. Additionally, leadership transitions can leave commissions vulnerable to losing institutional knowledge.

Digital systems help ease those pressures by integrating statutory requirements into workflows, automatically tracking deadlines, and maintaining a clear administrative record, they allow staff to focus more on professional judgment. For smaller LAFCOs, this provides cost-effective compliance support. For larger ones, it ensures consistency and efficiency. And for everyone in between, it boosts resilience, making sure the work continues regardless of who is in charge or how many applications are pending.

Built for LAFCOs—And Built for Flexibility

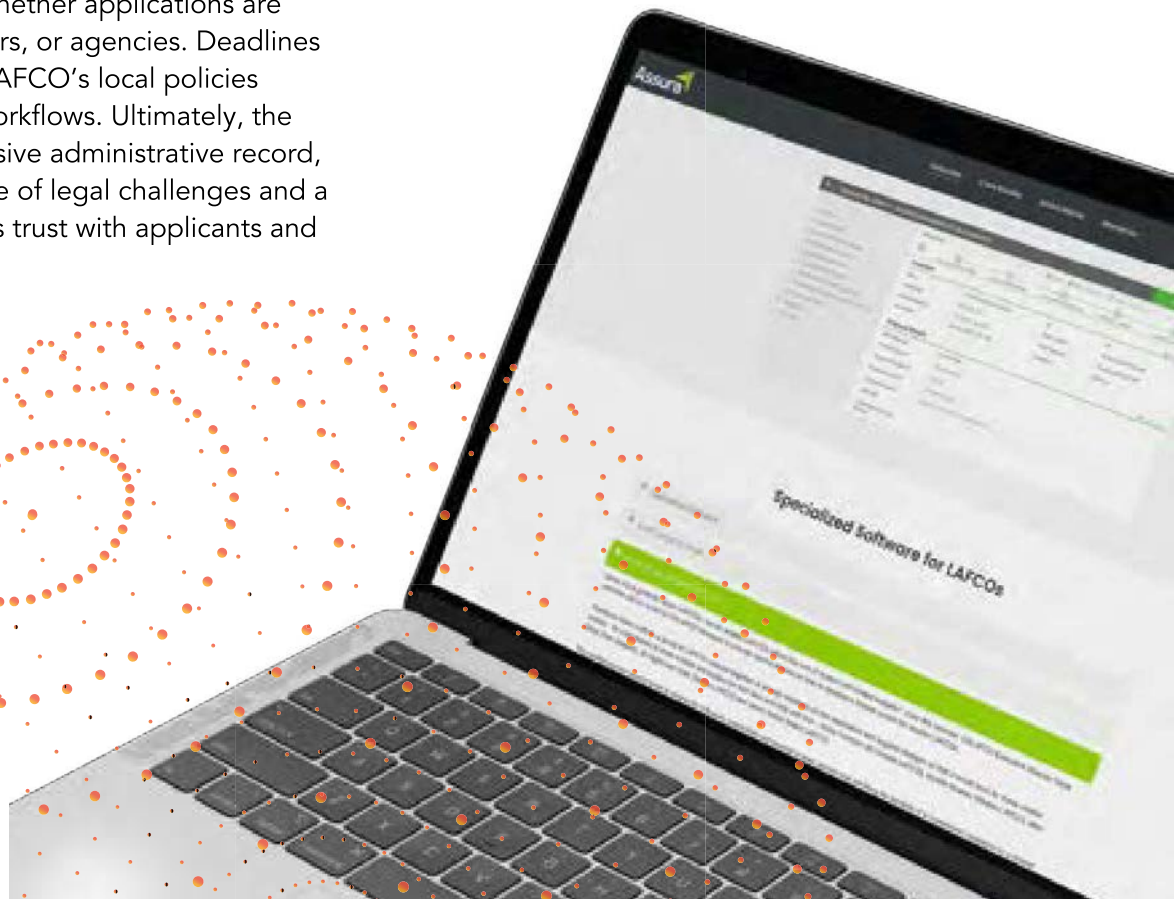
The advantage of this approach is its flexibility. Processes adjust based on whether applications are initiated by landowners, voters, or agencies. Deadlines are set automatically. Each LAFCO's local policies can be integrated into the workflows. Ultimately, the system creates a comprehensive administrative record, serving as a safeguard in case of legal challenges and a valuable resource that fosters trust with applicants and the public.

Why It Matters

The size of LAFCO staffing statewide varies greatly. Some LAFCOs are run by a single part-time contract worker, while others handle a steady flow of proposals with a whole team of employees. Regardless of size, the expectations remain the same: deadlines must be met, and the public deserves transparency. Digital tools don't replace staff expertise; they support it. They act as a safety net, ensuring that critical steps aren't left to memory or luck.

Meeting Tomorrow's Challenges

LAFCOs have always been resourceful: finding ways to get the job done with persistence and creativity, even if it meant relying on old binders or handwritten notes. But today's reality makes that harder to maintain. For small LAFCOs, digital tools can make the difference between feeling overwhelmed and feeling in control. For larger commissions, they help keep teams consistent and work flowing smoothly. And for all LAFCOs, they build resilience. That's how commissions, together, can meet today's demands while preparing for tomorrow's challenges.





Reuniting Special Districts With Their Rightful Assets

Unclaimed Property Program

By California Special Districts Association

In August, State Controller Malia M. Cohen announced special districts from throughout California will be reunited with a combined \$181,728 in unclaimed property. Controller Cohen presented an unclaimed property check during her remarks at the CSDA Annual Conference & Exhibitor Showcase in Monterey.

California's Unclaimed Property program is administered by the State Controller's Office (SCO), which currently safeguards unclaimed properties worth a total of \$14 billion. Since 1959, this consumer protection program has been designed to ensure businesses and other entities return properties belonging to a customer with whom they have lost contact.

Common types of unclaimed property include bank accounts, stocks, bonds, uncashed checks, insurance benefits, and safe deposit box contents.

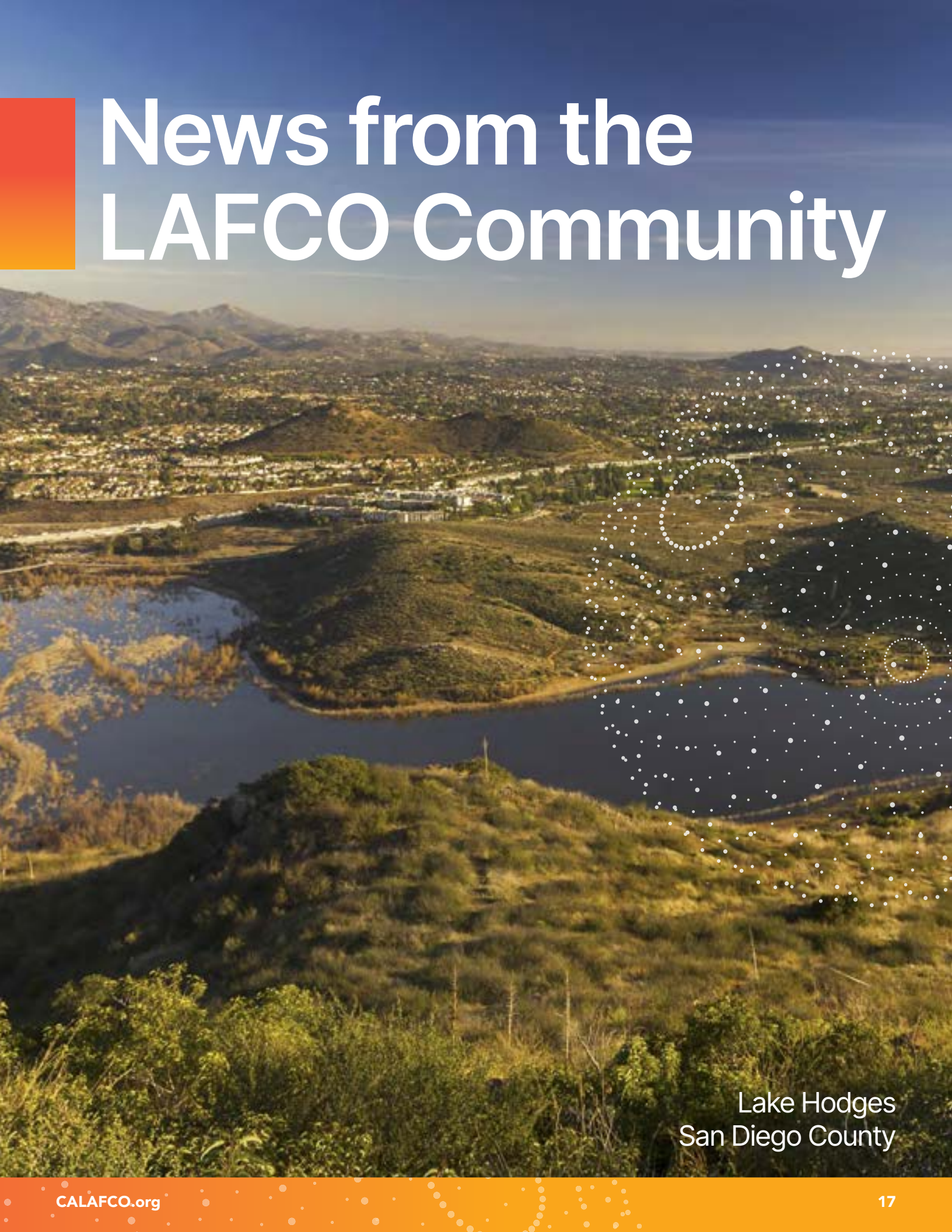
"Reuniting Californians — and the communities that serve them — with their rightful assets is a core mission of the State Controller's Office," said Controller Cohen. "I am proud to highlight that commitment here today with our special district partners. As California's chief fiscal officer, I remain focused on working with local governments to strengthen financial stewardship and ensure resources reach every corner of our state so that we can continue to move California forward so that everyone thrives."

"When state and local leaders partner together, California's communities win," stated California Special Districts Association CEO Neil McCormick. "Controller Cohen's proactive efforts are helping our local service specialists make every dollar work for its intended purpose."

Controller Cohen urges all Californians to visit SCO's claimit.ca.gov website to learn more about and search for their unclaimed property.



California Special Districts Association
Districts Stronger Together

An aerial photograph of Lake Hodges in San Diego County, showing the lake, surrounding green hills, and a residential area in the background under a clear blue sky. A decorative graphic of white dots forming concentric circles is overlaid on the right side of the image.

News from the LAFCO Community

Lake Hodges
San Diego County

Announcing the CALAFCO Regional/Board Restructuring Working Group

By Pamela Miller, Miller Management & Consulting Group, CALAFCO Transition Team Consultant

While significant progress has been made since February in CALAFCO's transformation, there is still a substantial amount of work to be done. I will continue the work of Policy & Procedure review and reforms, assisting the Board in strengthening its governance capabilities, supporting the Interim Executive Director, Regional Officer Team, and Membership.

A comprehensive structural review of CALAFCO as an organization, including the structure of the Board, Regional Officers, Committees, and the regions themselves, began earlier this year, leading to several preliminary recommendations. This work will continue, now with a working group consisting of the Interim Executive Director (IED) and nine (9) Executive Officers (EOs). Members of the working group include: Michelle McIntyre (Incoming IED); Regional Officers José Henríquez (CALAFCO EO/Central); Joe Serrano (DEO/Coastal); Shannon Costa (DEO/Northern); and Tyler Salcido (DEO/Southern); Kai Luoma, EO, Ventura; Jason Fried, EO, Marin; Christine Crawford, EO, Yolo; Brian Spaunhurst, EO, Fresno; and Colette Santsche, EO, Trinity/Humboldt.

The working group began meeting in mid-September and picked up the research, work, and preliminary recommendations that had already been started. They will focus on redeveloping a statewide regional structure designed to allow for a more effective, efficient, and collaborative relationship among the LAFCOs and the regions themselves (to include all 58 LAFCOs); recommend restructuring the Board based on the proposed regional structure, including eligibility to serve on the Board; and examine the Regional Officer and Committee structures for greater effectiveness. All of this will lead to a comprehensive review of the dues structure (to be done in the next phase of work).

The working group is committed to a thorough and transparent process. Ideas and recommendations will be developed and shared with Member LAFCOs and the Board throughout the process, allowing all input and ideas to be evaluated in a thorough and collaborative manner.

A final draft of recommendations will be presented to the Membership at the mid-year virtual business meeting to be held February 23, 2026, at 10:00 am for consideration and adoption. Additionally, Policies & Procedures will be developed in advance of the Membership meeting and presented to the Board in order to support any pending structural changes that may be approved by the Membership.

I want to personally thank everyone who has and continues to provide input into the future of CALAFCO.

Together, you are building a stronger, more responsive, and cohesive CALAFCO.

This working group is counting on your voices to co-develop CALAFCO's future for the benefit of all.



Yolo LAFCO Welcomes New Staff JD and Desi

By Christine Crawford, Executive Officer, Yolo LAFCO

It's been a year of new beginnings at Yolo LAFCO, and we're excited to share that two wonderful folks have joined our team.

In January, JD Trebec joined our team as Deputy Executive Officer. JD has hit the ground running, bringing fresh energy and perspective to our projects and policy work. Previously, he was a Senior Planner at Yolo County and came to us with already strong community connections. Outside the office, JD is a Master Gardener who loves getting his hands in the soil and sharing plant wisdom.



Then in August, we welcomed Desi Leverett as our new Administrative Specialist/Clerk. Previously, she supported a team of 32 engineers at DWR. Desi is already keeping us organized and making sure our meetings and operations run smoothly. When not at LAFCO, Desi is studying Anthropology at San Jose State, bringing a curious and thoughtful outlook to everything she does.

Terri Tuck officially retired from LAFCO at the end of 2024, after 19 years of dedicated service, and has been assisting us through this transition as a retired annuitant through October. We congratulate Terri on her well-deserved retirement and appreciate her dedication during this changeover period.

We're thrilled to have JD and Desi on the Yolo LAFCO team, and we can't wait for all of you across the LAFCO family to get to know them, too, at the Annual Conference!





CALAFCO Mentorship Program

By Kristi Grabow, Policy Analyst,
Sacramento LAFCO, and Deborah
Gilcrest, Clerk/Analyst, Nevada LAFCO

As we all know, CALAFCO continues to make great strides in expanding learning opportunities for its members. One of the newest initiatives, recently conceived and now in its early development stages, is the CALAFCO Mentorship Program. This exciting program is designed to support the professional growth of LAFCO staff through structured, meaningful connections—and will officially launch at our 2026 Staff Workshop!

The coordinators behind this effort are a dedicated group of LAFCO professionals committed to enhancing statewide collaboration, promoting knowledge-sharing, and fostering inclusive leadership within our diverse LAFCO community.

The team currently includes Deborah Gilcrest (Nevada), Jason Fried (Marin), Kate McKenna (Monterey), Brian Spaunhurst (Fresno), Crystal Craig (Riverside), Shannon Costa (Butte), and Kristi Grabow (Sacramento).

The mission of the program is simple but powerful: to foster lasting professional relationships that provide opportunities for mutual learning, peer support, and shared growth. Whether you're brand new to LAFCO or a seasoned professional, this program offers a chance to both give and receive valuable insight, encouragement, and perspective.

We are eager to see how this program helps shape the next generation of LAFCO leaders, and we invite YOU to be part of it! Stay tuned for details on how to participate, whether as a mentor or a mentee, and consider bringing your own experience, energy, and curiosity to this important new CALAFCO initiative. We can learn from one another and continue building a stronger, more connected LAFCO community.

Navigating Change Through Regional Collaboration:

Alameda LAFCO's Strategic Regional Wastewater Committee

By Rachel Jones, Executive Officer, Alameda LAFCO

Across Alameda County, the challenge of managing wastewater doesn't stop at city limits. Aging pipes, rising sea levels, and fragmented governance require a united response; one that no single agency can achieve alone. In recognition of this, our Commission launched a Strategic Regional Wastewater Committee, bringing agencies to the same table to spark dialogue, identify shared vulnerabilities, and explore collaborative solutions.

The committee acts as a platform for city, special district, and county representatives to assess long-term system resilience and interagency service strategies. Initial discussions have centered on assessing capacity, infrastructure investment requirements, and opportunities for collaborative planning. By bringing together multiple service providers in one forum, Alameda LAFCO has helped reframe wastewater planning as not only a local concern but also a regional resilience issue.

This effort also aligns with Alameda LAFCO's Resiliency Planning Project, a broader initiative aimed at enhancing the county's preparedness for climate adaptation. Wastewater systems are some of the most vulnerable public services to sea level rise, seismic activity, and extreme weather events.

Through this project, the Commission is beginning to incorporate resiliency considerations into service reviews and future boundary decisions, aiming to ensure that critical infrastructure remains reliable and sustainable.

Notably, this work has shown the importance of LAFCOs as conveners and impartial facilitators. Although LAFCO does not own or manage infrastructure, its legal authority and regional perspective give it a unique role in bridging jurisdictions and promoting collaborative planning. In Alameda County, these discussions are laying the foundation for a more coordinated, future-oriented approach to wastewater management that prioritizes both efficiency and fairness in service delivery.

As California communities continue to face pressures from growth, climate change, and aging systems, LAFCOs can play a vital role in fostering regional solutions. What began as an ad hoc committee in Alameda is becoming a blueprint for how LAFCOs can lead resilience efforts, showing that collaboration across boundaries today can safeguard communities for generations to come.



Mission Peak Regional Preserve
Alameda County

Charting a Stronger Future for Felton Fire:

How Santa Cruz LAFCO's Governance Options Report is Helping a Small District Meet Big Challenges

By Joe Serrano, Executive Officer, Santa Cruz LAFCO

Felton is the kind of community where neighbors still wave from the porch and the redwoods cradle every backyard. It's also a place where fire protection isn't abstract—it's a crystal clear experience. From wildland smoke on the horizon to medical aids on winding roads, the Felton Fire Protection District (FFPD) carries a broad remit on a lean, community-scaled organization. Like many independent fire districts across California, Felton has been navigating a shifting landscape: escalating wildfire risk, rising service demand, changing volunteerism, workforce and training standards, equipment replacement cycles, and the relentless math of inflation outpacing revenue growth.

Enter Santa Cruz LAFCO. Recognizing both the urgency and the opportunity, the Commission published the Felton Fire Protection District Governance Options Report, a practical roadmap designed to help local leaders, partner agencies, and the public evaluate credible paths to sustain (and enhance) fire and emergency services over the long term. The report's purpose was not to prescribe an answer; it was to structure a transparent, data-informed conversation about what comes next.

Why now? A convergence of pressures (and possibilities)

Across California, local fire providers are grappling with mounting pressures that challenge traditional service models. Longer fire seasons and increasingly complex incidents demand deeper staffing, specialized equipment, and stronger mutual aid networks. At the same time, agencies face workforce hurdles, from recruiting and retaining volunteers to meeting the higher standards of an increasingly professionalized fire service. Capital needs add another layer of strain, as aging engines and stations require costly replacements that far exceed the slow growth of revenues. All the while, communities expect fast response times, advanced life support, and proactive fire prevention programs, raising the bar on what local agencies must deliver.

The Felton Fire Protection District is the latest to experience these realities firsthand. Historically reliant on volunteers, Felton FPD in 2021 operated with a single full-time fire chief, one part-time employee, and 28 volunteer firefighters. In the years since, the district has faced significant turnover—including four different fire chiefs, board member resignations, and a shrinking pool of active volunteers. A two-year agreement with the neighboring Ben Lomond Fire Protection District for operational services was meant to “buy some time and get back on their feet.” Still, that partnership ended after only six months, underscoring the instability of short-term solutions. Against this backdrop, Santa Cruz LAFCO's Governance Options Report provided the district with a structured framework to evaluate its path forward, balancing the need for reliable service, fiscal sustainability, and preservation of community identity in the face of growing challenges.





How Santa Cruz LAFCO advanced the conversation

LAFCO's role in the Felton Fire Protection District process is evident in its ability to convene, provide a method, and sustain momentum. By creating a safe space for open interagency discussion, LAFCO enables stakeholders to identify shared risks and opportunities. Through the use of a consistent framework that evaluates costs, service levels, and governance implications, LAFCO ensures decision-makers and the public can make clear, apples-to-apples comparisons.

Just as importantly, LAFCO helps keep the process moving forward by outlining near-term actions and decision points, preventing the effort from stalling after the study is complete. The Governance Options Report is not a one-time exercise; it is designed to anchor ongoing public dialogue, inform board direction, and guide practical next steps—whether that means contracting for services, pursuing a revenue measure, or considering a larger reorganization. The fact that residents were discussing the situation on social media, at community events, and during FFPD's board meetings was a win in itself from LAFCO's perspective, as the community finally acknowledged that there was a problem.

Lessons other LAFCOs can use

The Felton Fire Protection District Governance Options Report offers essential lessons that LAFCOs across the state can apply. First, options should be framed around outcomes, as residents care most about reliable response times and prevention capacity; governance should follow function. Not every solution is all-or-nothing, and hybrid approaches such as administrative/ "internal" consolidation, shared battalion coverage, or regional prevention teams can deliver significant benefits with minimal disruption. Clear cost modeling is also essential, with explicit thresholds (like staffing levels, apparatus age, or overtime burdens) that trigger the need for action.

Pairing short-term, "no-regrets" collaborations with longer-term structural options allows communities to move forward cautiously while building capacity. Finally, when creating these types of special studies, it is vital to collaborate with the affected agencies to ensure that the report has been properly vetted and verified. The last thing you want to do is publish a report and have the affected agency, or neighboring agencies, speaking in opposition to the findings and/or recommendations. LAFCO staff provided an "administrative copy" of the report and allowed the agencies to provide feedback before the document was published.

So, what now?

The Felton Fire Protection District Governance Options Report exemplifies what LAFCOs do best: help communities reconcile local values with regional realities through thoughtful, transparent governance evaluation.

In a fire environment that is hotter, longer, and more complex than ever, Santa Cruz LAFCO has provided a clear, credible set of choices—so Felton can remain exactly what it has always been: protected, prepared, and proudly local. And in the end, Felton FPD is the master of its own destiny; LAFCO (in this case) was more of a "spiritual" guide.





Planning Napa's Future, One SOI at a Time

By Brendon Freeman, Executive Officer, Napa LAFCO

In 2025, Napa LAFCO's most pivotal deliberations have centered on spheres of influence (SOIs), the Commission's most powerful long-range planning tool.

In April, the Napa Commission tackled a significant SOI amendment for American Canyon's Green Island area. The hearing drew robust testimony from the Farm Bureau, Greenbelt Alliance, Save the Bay, and Napa County, highlighting the diverse interests and high stakes surrounding land use in this part of Napa County.

By August, attention shifted to the draft SOI update for the Napa Sanitation District. That process sparked a broad discussion about the long-term viability of extending sewer service to the Monticello study area.

This discussion addressed the core issue of balancing growth with resource protection.

These actions highlight LAFCO's distinct role in determining where growth occurs, how services are delivered, and how open space and agricultural lands are preserved. Looking ahead, Napa LAFCO is currently reviewing its local SOI policy, with proposed amendments set for Commission consideration in October.

As other Commissions across California evaluate their own SOI updates, Napa's experience serves as a timely reminder that these tools remain essential for community planning, service management, and protecting the landscapes that define them.



From Anthropology to Infrastructure:

My First Year at LAFCO

By Meghan Traynor, Analyst I, San Diego LAFCO

I joined San Diego County LAFCO as an Analyst in July of 2024. Looking back at my first year, I am astounded by how entering the world of regional planning has impacted my perspective on cities, municipal services, and development. I now look at buildings and wonder what it cost to build them, where the materials came from, and, if in rural areas, whether they're on sewer or septic.

I graduated from UC San Diego in June 2024 with a degree in Sociocultural Anthropology with minors in Human Rights and Migration and Spanish Literature. As an undergraduate, I participated in research programs focused on migration to the U.S.-Mexico border, homelessness in San Diego, and the San Diego community's responses to climate change. I also worked as a management intern for the San Diego City Council.

I am currently working on several projects at San Diego LAFCO: my proposal work, an MSR on our region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG), a special study on the regional administration and funding of homelessness services, and a Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation Grant in collaboration with the County of San Diego.

The special study on homelessness was encouraged by one of our Commissioners. LAFCOs are responsible for evaluating the current and future municipal needs of our residents, and we have identified homelessness services and solutions as crucial ones. We are analyzing how San Diego County's federally designated Continuum of Care distributes homelessness funding to non-profits and other agencies in the region to provide homelessness services. I believe that this information is beneficial for staff, our Commissioners, and the public in understanding the technical aspects of how homelessness services are funded, delivered, and evaluated regionally.

In wanting to see a future in which all people have the basic right to housing, transportation, and other basic needs, working at LAFCO has taught me the realities of how we build housing, fund transportation, administer fire protection services, treat water, and manage natural resources. I have been introduced to County departments, Cities, Special Districts, State Assembly and Senators' offices, and have greatly enjoyed learning about their work.

Attending the CALAFCO conference in Yosemite in 2024 and the Staff Workshop in Temecula in 2025 made me appreciate the diversity of LAFCOs in our state. We all face unique contexts, but are united in interpreting the Cortese-Knox Hertzberg Act and what it means to facilitate "orderly growth and development". My year working for San Diego LAFCO has shown me that LAFCOs can push the envelope and promote generative discussions about improvements to the regional administration of municipal services. I am grateful to work alongside a supportive and encouraging team and look forward to continuing to grow and serve the public.



We'll Take That, for a Dollar!

Lessons Learned on Volunteer Company Facility Transfers in Fire Agency Reorganizations

By Mark Bramfitt, Executive Officer, Sonoma LAFCO

Over the past decade, Sonoma LAFCO has overseen the reorganization of a dozen fire agencies. These efforts consolidated one city department, 10 districts, and 16 volunteer fire companies into four remaining districts. While the outcomes generally enhanced service delivery and financial stability, two reorganizations uncovered an often-overlooked challenge: the transfer of facilities owned by volunteer fire companies.

"Secure the firehouse before approving the reorganization."

Case Studies: When Facilities Become Sticking Points

KNIGHTS VALLEY (2018)

The Geyserville Fire Protection District, now called North Sonoma County Fire, assumed responsibility for Knights Valley territory. While LAFCO successfully ordered the transfer of assets and liabilities from the district, it had no authority over the nonprofit Knights Valley Volunteer Fire Company, which owned the firehouse. The company opposed the transfer, trying to negotiate permanent staffing at the station, despite this not being included in the Plan for Services. For nearly two years, Geyserville had to park an engine on private property until mediation resulted in a small \$1 annual lease.

BODEGA (2023)

Gold Ridge Fire Protection District reorganized 10 volunteer companies with plans to staff the Bodega station. However, the volunteer company demanded \$25,000 annually to lease its facility. Gold Ridge rejected the demand, citing fairness to taxpayers after securing other leases for \$1 per year. The impasse forced Gold Ridge to withdraw equipment and personnel, sparking community outcry. Ultimately, the company relented and signed a \$1 lease.





Why This Happens: LAFCO's Authority and Its Limits

LEGAL CONTEXT

Under the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act, LAFCOs can direct the transfer of assets and liabilities between government agencies during a reorganization (Gov. Code § 56375). However, volunteer fire companies are nonprofit corporations, not government entities. Therefore, their facilities fall outside LAFCO's jurisdiction. This creates a significant gap: reorganizations can proceed without guaranteed access to critical facilities.

Lessons for LAFCOs Statewide

These Sonoma experiences highlight risks that apply anywhere in California where volunteer companies own stations.

To avoid service disruptions and political backlash, LAFCOs should:

- **Require Agreements Upfront.** Make facility transfer or lease agreements a condition of approval before finalizing reorganizations.
- **Prefer Ownership, Accept Long-Term Leases.** Agencies need security to ensure, maintain, and invest in facilities.
- **Anticipate Negotiation Pressure.** Volunteer boards might seek leverage during reorganization; plan accordingly.
- **Balance Community Pride With Service Needs.** Many volunteer stations are locally funded and deeply valued. A collaborative, transparent process can ease transitions.

Quick Tips for Commissioners

- Ask staff early about volunteer-owned facilities.
- Consider requiring legal review of facility agreements.
- Build community engagement into the process.
- Document all commitments in the Plan for Services.

Final Takeaway

Most fire reorganizations succeed and provide stronger, more sustainable services. However, LAFCOs must understand that facilities owned by nonprofits pose unique challenges.

The key lesson is straightforward: secure the firehouse before approving the merger. Whether through transfer or long-term lease, a signed agreement can prevent years of conflict and ensure smooth fire protection for the communities we serve.

OC LAFCO Has a New Team Member

Welcome Policy Analyst Leo Lara

By Orange County LAFCO

OC LAFCO has a new team member, Policy Analyst Leo Lara. Leo brings valuable experience from his recent work on water efficiency topics and water policy research. A recent Master of Public Policy graduate from the University of California, Irvine, with a concentration in environmental and sustainability policy, Leo brings valuable experience and insight to the team in policy analysis, data management, and regulatory compliance, shaped by his education and previous professional experience.



Leo is looking forward to taking on new challenges, particularly in projects that intersect with water and municipal governance. He is eager to contribute new ideas and collaborate with the team to help ensure efficient and effective delivery of municipal services across Orange County. When not in the office, Leo enjoys exploring new hiking trails in Orange County, traveling, trying out new coffee shops, and scuba diving in the crystal-clear waters of Catalina Island.

LA LAFCO Welcomes Two New Commissioners

Imelda Padilla and Ryan Altoon

By Los Angeles LAFCO

LA LAFCO is proud to welcome two new commissioners, Imelda Padilla and Ryan Altoon. Commissioner Padilla serves on the Los Angeles City Council, representing the Sixth District, and is the new Alternate Member representing the City of Los Angeles. A resident of Toluca Lake, Ryan Altoon is the new Voting Member representing the San Fernando Valley. Of the 15 positions on the Commission, 14 are now filled. Welcome, Commissioners Padilla and Altoon!

In June, Los Angeles County Supervisor and LAFCO Commissioner Lindsey Horvath recently hosted a "Water Resiliency Summit" attended by more than 200 elected officials, water agency managers, community representatives, and other stakeholders. LA LAFCO Executive Officer Paul Novak was one of four speakers on a panel titled "LA County Water Plan: Innovation & Collaboration."

Supporting Recovery After the Eaton Fire

By Paul Novak, Executive Officer, Los Angeles LAFCO

At its July meeting, the Los Angeles LAFCO unanimously approved a fee waiver request from the County Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County. The waiver, valued at about \$75,000, applies to a proposed annexation into Sanitation Districts No. 16 and 17 covering unincorporated Altadena and Kinneloa Mesa—areas directly affected by the devastating Eaton Fire.

The annexation will enable impacted properties to connect to the Districts' sewage treatment system. Without the waiver, property owners would have faced reimbursement obligations for connection filing fees, adding financial stress during an already challenging recovery.

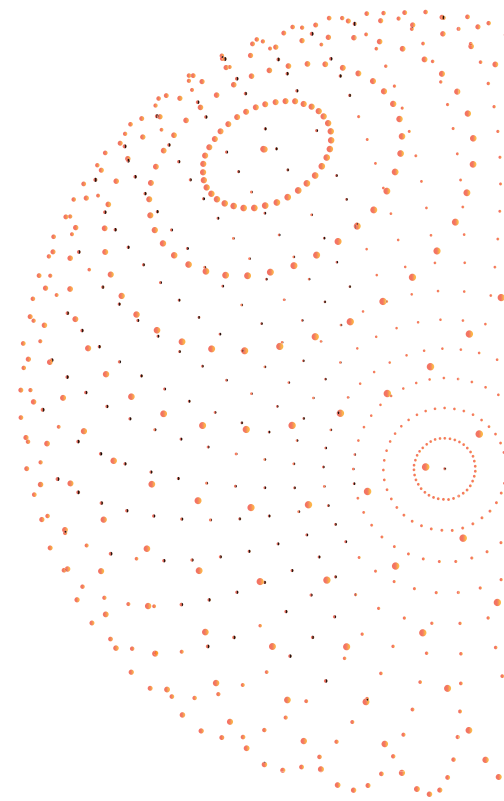
Recognizing this burden, staff recommended approval, and the Commission agreed that requiring payment of the fees would be harmful to the public interest.

"This decision is about compassion as much as compliance," staff noted in their recommendation, emphasizing the Commission's responsibility to support residents as they rebuild. By balancing regulation with community needs, Los Angeles LAFCO helped facilitate recovery efforts in the fire-affected communities.



Within the Sphere:

A LAFCO Crossword Puzzle



Join Us for Our Next Conference

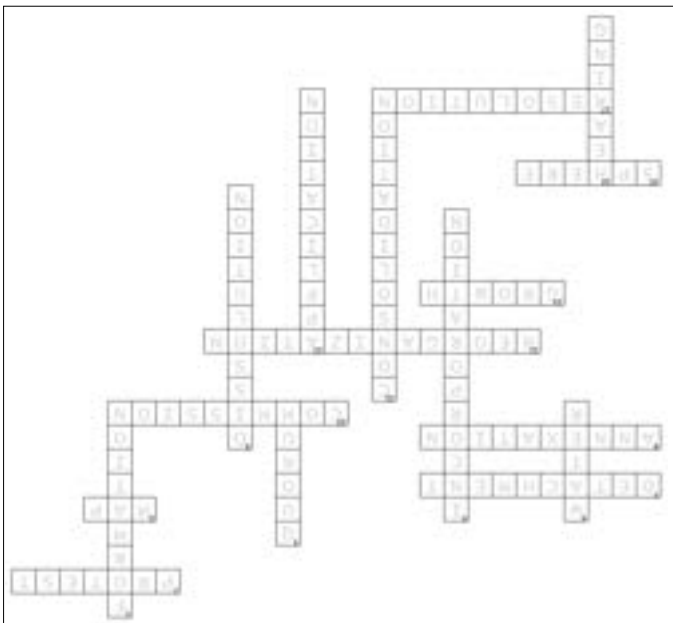
OCTOBER 21-23, 2026

Sheraton Grand Sacramento Hotel, CA
Hosted by CALAFCO

California Association of
Local Agency Formation Commissions

CALAFCO

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITY GROWTH



EXPLORATION AND SURVEY
OF A
R.D. ROUTE FROM THE MISSISSIPPI RIVER
TO THE
PACIFIC OCEAN
IN 1855

GEOLOGICAL MAP
OF A PART OF THE STATE OF
CALIFORNIA

EXPLORED IN 1855 BY
LIEUT. R. S. WHILANSON U.S. TOPOG.

Prepared to accompany the report of
WILLIAM P. BLAKE
GEOLOGIST OF THE EXPEDITION.

Scale of Miles



Let of Survey Map of State

California Association of
Local Agency Formation Commissions

CALAFCO

SUPPORTING SUSTAINABLE
COMMUNITY GROWTH

1451 River Park Drive, Ste 185, Sacramento, CA 95815 | CALAFCO.org