

FRANCINE M. FARBER: Important to vote on Tuesday

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If you are one of thousands in Fresno County served by special districts, you probably don't give much thought to them. If you had to guess, you probably think the county supervises them. Or maybe LAFCO. But you're not sure what LAFCO is, either. And you really don't know what the special districts are all about.

So when you received your ballot for the election on Nov. 3, and all you saw on it was special district elections, you decided you wouldn't bother to vote. I'd like to change your mind.

Recently the League of Women Voters of Fresno became involved in learning about LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission) and the special districts when it received a grant to investigate whether local government agencies obey freedom of information laws about releasing public documents to the public.

While all the police departments in the county, except one, provided the requested information about police calls from local schools, the 18 special water districts that we polled did not do as well.

Only about one-third of the districts complied in a timely fashion to requests for the minutes of their most recent meeting, salary schedules for employees, and copies of Form 700 which reveals potential conflicts of interest.

As a result, the League decided to run an informational meeting about the special districts with the cooperation of LAFCO. Deputy Director Darrel Schmidt and attorney Kenneth Price, general counsel for LAFCO, were among the panel that attracted a record 50 guests to our event.

We learned that the state legislature created a LAFCO in each county as an independent body in 1963 to work with the burgeoning number of local governmental agencies. The purpose was to conduct hearings leading to consolidating, approving or blocking new districts, subject to local voting.

Now, almost 50 years later, Fresno County has 122 special districts covering an alphabetical list of 21 different types of districts beginning with Cemetery and Community Services Districts, continuing with

Fire Protection and Flood Control, and ending with Water Districts.

The League decided to test the water districts' compliance with freedom of information laws because water is such an important issue here. We took our disappointing results to LAFCO, hoping this agency would exercise some authority over the offending districts and provide education to them about their responsibilities.

To our surprise, we learned that LAFCO has no authority over the special districts. In fact, nobody does! Each agency has its own board and/or commission. While LAFCO is required to perform a Municipal Service Review of each district every five years, it lacks power to require changes.

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A Fresno County Grand Jury had issued a scathing report about some of the special districts a few years ago and members of this Grand Jury are still disgruntled because, despite the validity of its findings, there is no individual or agency that has the power to issue penalties or enforce the laws.

Most members of the special district boards have not received training regarding their legal and ethical responsibilities such as freedom of information laws and the Brown Act.

So it becomes all the more important for you to elect responsible individuals to the special districts on Tuesday.

Whether you are served by the Fig Garden Fire Protection District, the Orange Cove Police District or Pinedale Water, it is your responsibility to vote for the best qualified candidate. And if you are not satisfied with the candidates, think about running yourself in the next election.

To find out more about the special districts, go to the new LAFCO web site, www.fresnolafco.org, and click on "district directory." LAFCO has done an excellent job in listing each district's responsibilities and information about its board and meetings.

And ask your state representative to support Assembly Bill 1109, which will give some teeth to LAFCO when a special district is not performing properly.