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HEADLINE: **Community councils find apathy** a hazard

BYLINE: BARBARA E. HERNANDEZ; THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

BODY:

Community councils give unincorporated areas of the Coachella Valley a voice in local government, but now apathy and illness are turning the advisory boards mute.

"It's apathy," said Elaine Geraty, chairwoman for the North Shore Community Council. "It's human nature. They want things done but like it when someone else does it."

The North Shore Community Council, which lost one member and its quorum last month, has only two members on the board. Without a quorum, the council can't meet or make recommendations to the Riverside County Board of Supervisors.

The situation isn't an isolated one. Some community councils, which act as advisory boards to the supervisors, say they have been hurt by a lack of interest and an aging membership.

County supervisors appoint the council members from fields of applicants. The members usually serve a four-year term.

To be eligible, an applicant must be a registered voter and a resident of the area that advisory board represents. The applicant also must submit to a background check.

Fourth District Supervisor Roy Wilson, whose constituency includes the Coachella Valley, said the councils serve a useful purpose. The councils have no authority beyond making recommendations, but Wilson said input from the community councils guides his decisions and those of the board.

The Indio Hills Community Council, which represents an area northwest of Indio, has only four of its five seats occupied, said Michael Lewis, the council's chairman.

"We have one seat open, and we're recruiting, but we haven't been able to fill that," he said.

Lewis said the council was formed in response to the Joshua Hills project. Many residents opposed the proposed 7,000-home community that was to stretch from Sky Valley to Indio Hills. The developer dropped the plan in July.

"Since it ended, the attendance numbers have just dwindled," Lewis said. "Without a strong issue, people tend to lose interest in attending regular meetings."

Art Sampson, 72, chairman of the Thousand Palms Community Council, said although he has a full board, it has been hard to find people to serve on the five-member panel. There were only three members - just enough to make a quorum - present for the council's March meeting, he said. February's meeting was canceled because only two members could attend, he noted.

Retirees fill many of the seats on the community councils, and the panels also can lose members to illness or health problems.

David Limon Saldivar, chairman of the Vista Santa Rosa Community Council in Thermal, said the board has no vacancies, but its members do miss meetings due to illness.

"Sometimes they're suffering from health problems and can't attend," Saldivar said. "Two of our members are a little up there in age."

Sampson said the same is true of the Thousand Palms panel.

"I'm 72, another member is 78," he said. "We need new blood."

Steven Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said that community councils provide an important voice to areas in the county.

"It's a good way to raise a hue and cry rather than one poor soul knocking on doors saying, 'Hey, we've got a problem here,'" Frates said.

He said elected officials and city staffers often listen to the councils because they have the potential to become a political powerhouse.

In Bermuda Dunes, Community Council Chairman Jerry Lugo said the community is looking to become a community services district with its own government and infrastructure.

Lugo said Bermuda Dunes has no problem filling council seats.

"I don't want to say people here are more civic-minded, but we've been very lucky," Lugo said.

Frates said forming community service districts is an option for those councils that seek more independence. Usually the districts make money from property taxes or community assessments.

"With a community service district, you have more influence but not the total control of a municipality," he said. "It's more specific control without the headaches of being a city."

GRAPHIC: LORETTA VLACH/SPECIAL TO THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE / Mike Russell, left, addresses Thousand Palms Community Council members Karen Esposito, Art Sampson and Leonard Thompson. (DMR ZONES); PHOTO

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