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## County fire agency gets conditional approval

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The long struggle to create a county fire authority took a significant step forward yesterday as a key local agency gave conditional approval to the proposal.

Now comes the hard part: How to pay for it.

County supervisors have to figure out how to drum up \$26.5 million annually for the San Diego County Regional Fire Authority. The county has identified sources that would cover less than half that amount.

Discussions about a county fire department have been held for more than a decade but took on a greater sense of urgency after the historic 2003 wildfires.

Most fire districts in unincorporated parts of the county, however, say they don't want to participate.

"If it was easy (to create), it would have been done," said Supervisor Dianne Jacob.

Supervisor Bill Horn opposes the plan and other supervisors have been noncommittal.

San Diego is the only county in the state without its own fire agency. A year after the deadly 2003 Cedar fire, the largest recorded in state history, 81 percent of voters cast ballots in favor of an advisory measure to consolidate fire agencies in unincorporated areas.

The county relies on a network of independent fire departments run by cities, special districts, volunteers, state and federal agencies, and Indian tribes. This arrangement has been cobbled together since the the county abandoned its fire agency for financial reasons in the 1970s.

The San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission voted 7-1 yesterday to forward the proposal to county supervisors, who must secure funding before the agency can begin operating July 1. Each county in the state has a commission to oversee government reorganizations.

There are several possibilities to fill the funding gap, all of which are far from certain.

County supervisors could petition the state and federal government for money, create a ballot measure to ask voters to raise taxes, or shuffle existing funds in their budget to pay for the authority.

Jacob, a LAFCO commissioner, said she considered a ballot measure a last resort.

The deadline to place a measure on the June ballot is March 7.

The proposal calls for the merger of seven fire protection districts – Boulevard, Campo, East County, Mount Laguna, Pine Valley, San Diego Rural and San Pasqual – that cover about 500,000 acres. Other districts could join in the future.

In addition to those districts, the new authority would cover 940,000 acres in the county's unincorporated areas that are not served or are underserved today. The ultimate goal is for a county-run district to provide fire protection to a half-million people who live on nearly 2.3 million acres in the county's unincorporated areas.

About a dozen fire officials from around the county supported the new authority at yesterday's meeting.

Horn, a LAFCO commissioner who cast the dissenting vote and who represents much of North County, said he doesn't believe the promise that each fire district will be at or above their current service level under the authority. He said the \$26.5 million could be better spent on additional fire equipment for various agencies.

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