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## Funding Fire: A Losing Proposition?

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on the politics of raising local revenue for fire protection by examining the issues surrounding San Diego County California's unsuccessful attempt in 2008 to pass Proposition A. Proposition A would have established a special fire protection parcel tax and a regional fire protection agency to coordinate expenditures and regional firefighting efforts. In addition to an economy at the onset of a deep economic recession, California's constitutional requirement for two-thirds voter approval for dedicated tax increases, and conservative voters with an aversion to tax increases, supporters of Proposition A faced other issues that may have affected the outcome of the election, including the issues of timing, openness and transparency, accountability and trust, coalition building and political leadership, and demographic cleavages.

**Keywords:** fire financing, parcel tax, San Diego County, fire protection, wildland-urban interface

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# Funding Fire: A Losing Proposition?

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In recent years large, catastrophic fires, and particularly fires threatening homes and other structures in a growing wildland-urban interface, have caused federal agencies to run out of money and to transfer funds from other critical resource programs to meet their suppression expenses. To help alleviate these problems, Congress recently enacted the FLAME Act (Federal Land Assistance, Management and Enhancement Act), which established dedicated funds for federal emergency fire suppression activities to reduce agency need to borrow funds. Not as much attention, however, is being given to how to finance local ability to respond effectively to wildfire threats even though communities can and should play a significant and expanded role in prevention, suppression, and recovery efforts (National Wildfire Coordinating Group Executive Board 2009; Burns, Taylor, and Hogan 2008).

This paper focuses on the politics of raising local revenue for fire protection by examining the issues surrounding San Diego County California's unsuccessful attempt in 2008 to pass Proposition A. As proposed, Proposition A had two purposes: establish a special fire protection parcel tax, and establish a regional fire protection agency to coordinate expenditures and regional firefighting efforts. For parcels less than 50 acres the proposed tax would have been \$52 per year, with a sliding scale for larger parcels up to a maximum of \$1,000 per year. Half of the estimated yearly revenue of \$50 million would have gone to local agencies—including the county, all 18 cities, and all local fire protection districts within unincorporated areas. A new joint powers agency, the San Diego Regional Fire Protection Agency, would have managed the revenues from the parcel tax and overseen the deployment of regional firefighting resources and services—including specialized emergency equipment such as helicopters and airplanes; training programs for emergency personnel; communications systems for improved response times; and brush clearing and other fire protection programs. The regional agency would have consisted of 10 voting members: one member from the board of supervisors, the mayor of the city of San Diego, four city council members from four of the remaining 17 cities, and four members from local fire protection agencies in unincorporated areas.

Given the onset of the deep nationwide economic recession that faced voters just before the November 2008 election, and the generally conservative, tax averse bent of San Diego County voters, the fact that Proposition A failed to pass should come as no real surprise. But the fact that it came so close—63.58 percent of the voters approved it—was somewhat unexpected, but that was still less than the onerous two-thirds majority constitutionally needed in California for dedicated tax increases.

While the state of the economy, constitutional restrictions, and conservative tax-leery constituencies are obviously factors that affect the likelihood that new taxes can be imposed, there are also a number of other factors and issues that can challenge local entities in their revenue generation attempts. It is thus instructive to examine how San Diego County confronted several of these issues—timing, openness and transparency, accountability and trust, coalition building and political leadership, and demographic cleavages—in assembling and campaigning for Proposition A.

### **Timing**

Fire events, like other natural disasters, provide “windows of opportunity,” a short period of time after a disaster when heightened public interest and demands for remedial action provide officials a supportive climate for initiating and achieving policy change (Birkland 2006). Two of California’s largest fires occurred in San Diego County in 2003 and 2007. These fires presented windows of opportunity for the region to take policy action to reduce future fire risks. And indeed a number of operational changes resulted from numerous postfire reviews and evaluations. For example, the county improved fuel reduction programs, approved strict design regulations for new buildings that became some of the strictest in the state, and upgraded its public notification system for informing citizens about evacuations and fire conditions.

However, San Diego still remained the only county in the state without a regional fire agency, and the lack of a consolidated fire agency had been identified in many reports as one of the county’s major weaknesses. Although the concept of a merger of the county’s fire agencies had been suggested in a June 1997 fire funding survey, and approved conceptually by county voters in November 2004 (81 percent of voters in the unincorporated areas of the county had voted in favor of consolidating 35 fire protection agencies), the measure was only advisory and did not require the county board of supervisors to take any action. Consolidation was again identified in a 2005 San Diego County Grand Jury report as a way to focus on unincorporated areas susceptible to brush fires (San Diego Grand Jury 2005).

The process of consolidation was anything but easy because of the intricacies of California's growth and planning procedures. Following the fire siege of 2003 the county's board of supervisors began the process of consolidation by working with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO). (LAFCOs were formed in 1963 in every California county except San Francisco to coordinate planning, governance structures, and the growing governmental complexity of local jurisdictions. The San Diego LAFCO is comprised of members of the county's board of supervisors, representatives of cities and special districts, and one public member). The San Diego LAFCO reorganization plan began with a municipal service review of unincorporated fire districts, followed by joint action with the board of supervisors in February 2005 to form a regional fire protection district that would reorganize existing fire agencies. That action, however, was supplanted in August 2005 by another proposal developed by the San Diego County Fire Chiefs and County Fire Districts' Associations. This proposal called for a two-phase reorganization. Phase I would address unincorporated areas with the most critical need for increased funding and service improvement, while Phase II would bring in eight additional agencies under the umbrella of a regional fire agency. The parties agreed that no area would experience reductions in service as a result of the consolidation (San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission 2007). A Conceptual Reorganization Plan was issued in January 2007, and the county established a committee to assess the regional need for equipment, funding alternatives, and options for a regional fire authority. LAFCO approved the Phase I plan in December 2007, two months after the 2007 fires.

In January 2008 the board of supervisors directed the county's chief administrative officer to evaluate the LAFCO reorganization report. The county also joined forces with the city of San Diego, forming the San Diego Regional Fire Protection Committee (RFPC), comprised of two members of the county board of supervisors, four mayors (including San Diego's mayor and three others whose cities had been affected by the 2007 fires), and three fire chiefs.

The city of San Diego had had its own difficulties in getting voter approval for upgrading city fire capabilities. Hoping that the 2003 fires would translate to voter support for additional funding even in the city's most urbanized areas, the city turned to the ballot box. In March 2004, it sought a 2.5 percent increase in the transient occupancy tax to fund \$26 million for the San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, police emergency services, library and arts programs, park and coastal improvements, road improvements, and tourist promotion, but the dedicated tax failed to receive the necessary two-thirds majority vote. Joining the county, it now hoped a regional funding strategy for fire protection would succeed.

The RFPC was charged with coming up with both short- and long-term options for increasing fire protection. Five meetings of affected agencies were held, lead-

ing to development of a hybrid proposal to merge county service area fire agencies. Some affected agencies gave their support to the plan in April 2008, and at a joint meeting of the County Fire Chiefs' Association and the Fire Districts' Association in May 2008, members voted 24 to 3 to support the proposal.

Nonetheless, the issue of consolidation became bogged down over the governance structure of the proposed new regional fire agency, which changed names several times during the course of discussions. Fire districts in the unincorporated portions of the county wanted equal representation with cities that have their own fire departments, while city officials argued that county fire agencies were already represented through the five members of the board of supervisors who could be expected to look out for rural and suburban interests. Finally, in June 2008, county officials hammered out an initial proposal that would unify, at least to some extent, fire agencies within the rural area, with 12 of the most underfunded fire companies joining in three phases by 2012 (Manolatos 2008). Eleven other fire agencies in rural parts of the county opted out of consolidation, primarily over concerns about losing autonomy and not having input into how their needs would be met.

Once the consolidation proposal was approved, at least in theory, the RFPC moved on to an even more difficult issue—how to pay for the new agency's operation. The funding issue was first discussed publicly at a meeting of the committee in late June 2008, just two days after the consolidation agreement was reached. Members of the committee floated the idea of a \$50 per year parcel tax levied countywide. Some observers who attended the committee's meeting questioned whether the county could reach agreement on the proposed measure in less than six weeks—the time that remained before an August deadline for placement on the November 2008 general election ballot. One county supervisor on the committee questioned whether there was sufficient time to make the case for a new tax, while the president of the fire districts' association noted that the ballot was already filled with other measures by cities, fire districts, and schools seeking additional tax revenue. But the supervisor who was the main supporter of the parcel tax was optimistic that despite the previous failed attempts to fund fire protection, this time, the voters would approve the measure. "If there is a more important issue than what we're dealing with here, I don't know what it is," he said (Sifuentes 2008a).

In late July the RFPC issued its final report, marking what appeared to be agreement on the next step for an areawide approach to fire protection. Although the document did not quantify the needs of either the region as a whole or individual municipalities, it recommended the parcel tax as the preferred way of funding the new agency (San Diego Regional Fire Protection Committee 2008).

The urgency for action was driven by county counsel, who argued that the proposal had to be voted on in 2008 or there might not be another opportunity to bring the measure to voters before 2010. City and county officials appear to have made

a conscious choice to piggyback the fire measure onto the back of the 2008 presidential election, figuring that doing so would increase the chances of a high turnout among voters most likely to support the parcel tax. This view is corroborated by the work of several scholars who have studied turnout in local elections. More voters turn out in national and state-level elections than local ones (Bridges 1997), with one study showing that city elections held concurrently with a presidential election result in a turnout that is 36 percent higher than turnout in off-cycle elections (Hajnal and Lewis 2003). Waiting an additional year (to 2009) would probably have resulted in a lower turnout election and an increase in the antitax sentiment for which San Diego County is well known.

Moreover, windows of opportunity are only open for a short time; the longer the time interval after a disaster event before policy changes are proposed, the more public interest fades and the more difficult to gain political support. Proposition A supporters thus had to trade off the likelihood that the 2008 general election, which could also capitalize upon the window of opportunity opened by the previous year's fires, would favor passage, versus the risk of putting forth a proposal that one fire protection district president termed "not ready for prime time" (personal interview 2008). "The timing is not perfect. The proposal is not perfect" (Naiman 2008), commented one county supervisor as the county voted to put the measure on the ballot. Overall the belief of county leaders was that any proposal at this point was better than none.

### **Openness and Transparency**

There is a vast literature documenting how important it is to inform critical stakeholders and the public early-on and throughout the process of obtaining public support for making policy changes. Public involvement increases the legitimacy of decision processes and the likelihood that feasible proposals will be crafted and then efficiently and effectively implemented (National Research Council 2008). Policy success is correlated with open and transparent decision-making processes.

Local officials seemed to avoid public involvement throughout their discussions of whether to place the parcel tax on the November 2008 ballot. When the RFPC first publicly discussed the parcel tax in June 2008 and asked for public comment, it was apparent that important stakeholders as well as the public had little prior involvement or information upon which to base their comments. Both fire agency representatives and members of the committee seemed to be in the dark about the proposed governance structure and how funds might be spent. The entire process of debuting the parcel tax proposal had an aura of confusion and political ineptitude.



After the initial roll-out of the parcel tax concept at the June RFPC meeting, development of the actual November ballot proposal continued to be cloaked in secrecy and back room negotiations among a small group of stakeholders with minimal public input. The RFPC had only a few meetings before approving what remained a skeleton proposal in July. Neither the RFPC, nor the county board of supervisors, which would eventually have to approve putting a tax on the ballot, appeared interested in a public discussion about how much money would be needed to adequately fund county fire protection, or the prioritization of expenditures, even though the measure would require two-thirds of the November vote for approval.

Homeowners' groups, for instance, knew little about the proposed tax except what they learned from the media. The head of the local taxpayers' association had not seen any draft language until late in the process, criticizing the proposal by noting, "It's astonishing to me that we're here at a hearing to consider placing a tax proposal that will amount to over \$2 billion in tax revenue over 30 years, and you're asking us to provide you with input over two weeks at a point where we still don't have an ordinance" (Sifuentes 2008b).

Political leaders rushed the parcel tax proposal through the government bureaucracy. Between the July vote of the RFPC and the August meeting of the board of supervisors to officially approve the consolidation agreement and the language of the parcel tax measure, the governance structure was changed dramatically, a tax escalation adjustment was revised, limitations were placed on the number of proposed staff, and more than a dozen other technical changes were made. Prior to the supervisors' meeting the county only provided notice that a hearing would be held, not the actual measure.

The city of La Mesa submitted a letter of opposition to the parcel tax and one fire protection district board president wrote a newspaper op-ed piece criticizing the proposal even before the measure came before the board for a vote, based only on their best guess of what the proposal might end up looking like (Mickens 2008). Mayors of several affected cities said they knew very little about the details of the ballot measure and were not able to support or oppose it, or to urge their constituents how to vote on it (Sifuentes 2008c). The dozen people who appeared in support or opposition to the agenda item had to speak in generalities because no copies of the actual proposal were available and few groups or individuals had even seen the ballot language prior to its distribution midway through the public hearing where it was presented. This process limited any substantive public input into a decision that appeared to have been made long before the meeting even started as the supervisors voted unanimously to put the matter to the voters. The entire process from FPRC to board approval took less than three weeks. The public hearing to consider the measure took less than two hours, not necessarily a positive statement given the skepticism and uncertainties that existed.



### **Accountability and Trust**

Related to openness and transparency is accountability. The public needs to have a clear picture of how dollars are to be spent and confidence that they will be spent wisely. Ambiguity can breed distrust (Rubin 1997).

In the case of Proposition A significant stakeholders as well as voters were for the most part being asked to trust that a detailed, specific, and equitable plan would be worked out after the election—approving a blank check if you will. Many of these stakeholders were officials from the county’s cities and fire districts who, if they were not, should have been, cognizant that they would be held accountable by their voters for buying a pig in a poke.

In addition, San Diego County residents may also have been influenced by the old adage, “Fool me once. . . .” In 1993, an expensive marketing campaign convinced California voters to enact Proposition 172, the Local Public Safety and Improvement Act, which replaced local property tax revenues with a half cent sales tax that was to be used to create a permanent revenue source for law enforcement, fire protection, district attorneys, corrections, and lifeguards. But in San Diego County, the board allocated the new revenues (about \$230 million annually) to the sheriff’s office (72.4%), district attorney (20.4%); and the probation department (7.2%). Voters who believed that the new revenues would help fund fire protection were surprised to find that they would repeatedly be asked to pay for firefighting resources they thought they were being taxed for in 1993. Although San Diego County’s supervisors had failed to deliver on the promises made with Proposition 172—at least in regard to fire protection—few seemed to realize that the board *could* have reallocated the revenues at any time simply by readjusting policy, a totally discretionary action. The board’s allocation policy was due to be reconsidered by December 31, 2001, but members failed to do so. A Grand Jury report specifically mentioned the possibility of reallocation, noting that if 20 percent of the sheriff’s funds were redirected to fire services, the resulting \$40 million would provide nearly one-third of the \$110 million estimated cost of a fully consolidated county fire department (San Diego County Grand Jury 2008).

Many of those who publicly opposed the parcel tax from the beginning said that without a more specific plan to present to the voters, the county was risking the one chance that might exist for approval. One firefighters’ representative prophetically predicted that the measure would fail if it were placed on the ballot without details, urging the county board of supervisors to postpone the effort until a plan was created. An editorial in the area’s main newspaper, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, questioned the lack of clarity in the parcel tax proposal and the exclusion of local fire chiefs in the discussion except for the three members of the RFPC (Next Draft, Please 2008).

### **Coalition Building and Political Leadership**

Taxation has lots of opponents and few natural supporters. Considerable effort to build coalitions among a variety of groups is needed to mobilize supporters and defuse opposition. Yet, neither the county, cities, nor the fire agencies that would benefit from Proposition A's passage seemed to have plans or a strategy to secure passage in the upcoming election. After the RFPC initially discussed the parcel tax idea, county officials said they would ask business leaders for donations and that they planned to hire a campaign consultant, but one staff member said discussions about a campaign for the November election were "premature until after the board's August vote. There will probably be some kind of an independent citizens' group formed to move the ballot measure forward," he said, but no one had been identified as a leader in support of the measure—now named Proposition A—less than two months prior to the election (personal interviews 2008). Another county staff member said that supporters were working behind the scenes (personal interviews 2008). A staff member for another supervisor said "We are not permitted by law to advocate, but we are allowed to give out information and educate people on what this is all about, and we have been doing that" (Sifuentes 2008d). One supervisor's staff member said he doubted that local fire chiefs would be willing to tell the public to vote against the parcel tax, even if they felt left out of the decision-making process or disagreed with the governance structure of a 10-member regional fire protection agency (personal interviews 2008). Another observer noted that the members of the county board were in a win-win situation no matter what happened with the November ballot measure. "If the voters approve the [parcel] tax, they win because they can say they took a leadership role. If the voters turn it down, the supervisors still win because they can say they did everything they could do but the public simply wasn't willing to pay for fire protection in San Diego County" (personal interviews 2008).

Little attention had been given up front as to what kind of structures akin to volunteer citizen bond/tax campaign committees would be available to build public support. Since a ballot measure was being considered it is questionable why a visible citizens' committee had not already been formed and adequately geared up to go actively on the stump immediately once approval had been obtained from elected officials. In addition to linking their leadership and prestige to support of the proposals, such committees can also play key roles in raising enough money from business and community elites to mount effective campaigns. In the case of Proposition A, however, supporters of the fire tax only raised about \$51,000 (Manolatos, Gustafson, and Armendariz 2008). Politically seasoned, veteran campaigners appeared to have no idea how to promote such a critical ballot measure besides making lunchtime presentations before service groups.

It was also painfully obvious that the county failed to get the necessary buy-in from local elected officials and fire chiefs. One mayor of a North County city noted, “At this point, I don’t have enough information to support this proposal and [to] urge the citizens of Encinitas to tax themselves in this manner” (Sifuentes 2008c). Fire chiefs in the county and other fire professionals, who could either do much to promote or kill the proposal, had obviously been brought in late in the game and had few specifics upon which to frame their responses. They lamented that they were not given a seat around the table when the proposition was being drawn up. “Why would we get behind something that affects us so immediately, when we’ve had no role in putting it together” (Carless 2008)? Fewer than two-thirds of the region’s chiefs would end up supporting the plan (San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum 2008).

Neither were there political contributions to the Proposition A campaign from local firefighter unions, even though they have historically become extremely invested in local political campaigns. The San Diego-Imperial Counties Labor Union (representing 100 local unions) also did not support Proposition A because they did not get a recommendation from rank-and-file firefighter groups to support the measure, so they decided to oppose it. Since ballot proposals are more likely to be successful when they have the support of those most affected by their passage (Moe 2005), if officials had been able to involve fire personnel in traditional get-out-the-vote efforts (making telephone calls, walking precincts, and sending out literature about the parcel tax), it may have helped garner the additional percentage of votes necessary for approval.

Other groups, such as the San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum, that might also have been expected to play a citizen leadership role sat mainly on the sidelines. The Forum had been formed by a former county fire chief after the 2007 wildfires to educate the public about the threat of wildfires and to recommend needed improvements in fire protection. The forum had spoken out publicly about on wildfire issues, and in February 2008 had itself issued a report charging that the region was completely unprepared for another massive wildfire and recommending formation of a countywide department (Welch 2008). Had deliberation been more transparent and inclusive from the beginning, the supervisors might have been able to craft a proposal that did not leave key expected supporters uncertain, skeptical, and unsupportive.

Political leadership and support is also crucial in building voter support. While public funds cannot be used directly to promote ballot measures, political leadership can still do much to affect voter perceptions and ultimately levels of public support. Proposition A won in the supervisorial districts where two leaders of the campaign—one supervisor and the mayor of the City of San Diego—were active supporters (68%, 67%), but it lost in the other three districts (59%, 65%, 60%). The

board member who represents the East County and most rural areas had openly criticized the measure, although she later reluctantly voted for it when it came to a vote to place the proposition on the November ballot. The measure failed in portions of the East County, where many of the rural communities are served by volunteer fire departments and less well-funded fire districts, and where fire districts had been only marginally involved in the development of the proposition. Politicians openly campaigned against the measure in four cities; it won in one of those cities (National City with 71% of the vote), and lost in the other three (Encinitas 62%; San Marcos 63%; and La Mesa 61%). Given the insularity and disorganization of the process used to frame the proposal and the chaos that reigned throughout the summer it is surprising that the tax garnered as much support at the polls as it did.

### **Demographic Cleavages**

Demographic cleavages also played into the voting dynamics of Proposition A, with evidence of urban/rural and coastal/inland splits. Smaller cities did not like the idea of what they saw as a subsidization of larger urban areas. Labeling the plan “flawed,” one La Mesa council member asserted: “The parcel tax is going to buy 25 fire engines. Nineteen of those fire engines —guess what—are going to the city of San Diego. All of the other cities and districts are actually now—I’m not a lawyer or nothing—subsidizing the city of San Diego” (La Mesa Fights Firefighting Tax 2008). Conversely, although concerns had been expressed that urban residents might not want to fund fire protection for residents who choose to build in fire prone areas (personal interview 2008), the measure won in the two most urban supervisorial districts, and lost in the three mostly rural districts.

The measure won in four coastal communities (Chula Vista 68%), Del Mar—which had been threatened by the 2007 Witch Creek Fire—(70%), Imperial Beach (67%), and National City (71%) and in the City of San Diego (67%). The measure lost in every one of the inland incorporated cities (13 of them, including ones threatened by previous fires). Although it did win, for example, in two of the unincorporated areas that had been burned in the previous fires, Otay and San Ysidro, overall it lost in the unincorporated portions of the county, with only 57% support of the vote. It received less than 40% support in the community of Crest, less than 50% in East County areas like Boulevard, Julian, Yaqui Wells, and around 50% in Jamacha, Jamul, Borrego Springs, and Harbison Canyon. All of these communities are in fire-prone areas. The measure received the least support in areas where many wildfires start and where fire protection is the thinnest.

In one of the North County communities hit hardest by the October 2007 fires, Rancho Bernardo, Proposition A didn’t even garner the support of a majority: ap-

proximately 11,000 residents voted in favor and 6,000 against. “That’s amazing,” said one University of California San Diego political science professor. “Where were those 6000 ‘no’ people during the fire?” He added: The backcountry is an embarrassment. They are the ones who are threatened the most. The people who are most in danger, who would most benefit, are the most resistant.” Acknowledging that the backcountry vote may have reflected distrust about what would become of local fire districts in a regional consolidation, he also suggested that the biggest factor was the desire to avoid new taxes, noting that coastal residents are typically more willing to dig into their pockets (Downey 2008).

It could also be argued that some homeowners may not have been convinced that fire fighting funds would be negatively affected by their no votes. During the massive fire emergencies in the state in 2008 and as the state struggled to deal with its severe state budget crisis, the governor assured affected residents that money for firefighting would not be a problem, perhaps well aware that failure to respond to a disaster is a “third-rail” type of political event. Because funds for fire disasters always seem to turn up, there is a disincentive for local voters to tax themselves in preparation of such events, especially if the costs can be spread out over the broader tax base of federal and state coffers. Homeowners have long wanted to avoid bearing the direct costs for managing fire hazards (Gardner, Cortner, and Bridges 1985).

Opponents also questioned the inequity of the parcel tax. Noting that the tax would charge the same \$52 dollars to most property owners, whether business or residential or trailer or mansion, opponents argued that the regressive tax would hit the working classes and retirees the hardest. Residents of unincorporated Rancho Santa Fe—one of the highest income communities in the nation—with a per capita income of \$113,132 would therefore pay the same amount as a resident of National City—where 20 percent of the residents are below the poverty level—with a per capita income of \$11,582. Interestingly, however, National City supported the tax while Rancho Santa Fe opposed it (63%).

There was also a regional/local cleavage. Consolidation, supporters argued, would mean more resources, better training, and a more focused effort to clear brush and vegetation in the rural areas where wildfires often start and where volunteer fire agencies are generally understaffed and under-equipped (Carless 2007, Erie 2008). Despite the arguments for greater efficiency and effectiveness, however, “in San Diego there is a long history of valuing local control” and “consolidation . . . threatens this decentralized status quo” (Erie 2008). One county supervisor, for example, called the creation of a centralized county fire institution “a paper fire department” that would move fire resources from his supervisorial district to another one. “It was our volunteers who proved last month that they know their territories better than anyone, because they live where they serve and consequently take the

fight against these fires personally” (Horn 2007). He said he would rather see the costs of a merged fire department go toward hiring more firefighters and buying equipment, rather than creating a larger bureaucracy. “I’d rather see my troops attack this thing, instead of sitting around and having a staff meeting.” He had been the only elected official to vote against the December 2007 LAFCO consolidation proposal (Carless 2007). An editorial in the *North County Times* urged a no vote on the proposal arguing that there was no need for another “remote” layer of bureaucracy (Vote No on Proposition A, 2008). Although unincorporated areas had previously voted for consolidation, paying for consolidation may also have been a different matter. There seemed to be a belief that consolidation, if it were to occur, could do so without any new revenues (Erie 2008).

### **Aftermath of the Vote**

Supporters said there was no Plan B for meeting the county’s firefighting needs, and county supervisors seemed reluctant to discuss other scenarios before the election. One supervisor commented, “I don’t like taxes. I don’t like parcel taxes. At the same time, I don’t see any other way of solving the problem” (Naiman 2008). Yet, after the election they were faced with considering other options. Critics of the parcel tax continued to argue that the county could find the money in existing county reserves. The supervisor who had supported the measure both on the RFPC and during the campaign trail flatly stated that this was unlikely to happen; the county’s public safety departments’ existing budgets were expected to be hurt by a significant drop in Proposition 172 retail sales tax revenues in 2008 as a result of the recession (Gustafson 2008).

Fifteen days after the election, however, LAFCO approved the San Diego Regional Fire Authority to oversee fire protection in an area that covered approximately one-third of the county currently served by six volunteer fire departments and CAL FIRE, the state fire agency. The district would report to the board of supervisors and be funded by dollars the county had set aside in June for fire protection; a newly created fire warden position would provide administrative support. A county supervisor stated that she hoped to expand the new authority in two years to other rural areas and then eventually to the county’s urban areas (Krueger 2008b). How financing would be handled for the expansion remained unclear, however. Immediately after the election this same supervisor had also stated that public safety officials from across the county would now need to regroup and think about spending the money they already had. This option seemed to mirror critics’ arguments prior to the Proposition A vote that supervisors should and could find money elsewhere and reallocate.



## Conclusion

Tax increases are difficult but not impossible. Prior to Proposition A, some communities within San Diego County had successfully approached their residents for financial support rather than waiting for a consolidation agreement or county-wide tax. Voters in one wildland-urban interface city, El Cajon, for example, took a major step one year after the 2003 fires in November 2004 by approving a half-cent sales tax. The tax, which will extend over a 10-year period, and fund police and fire facilities and equipment as well as a new animal shelter, passed by a 68.92 percent majority in an election requiring a two-thirds majority. Similarly, residents of Crest, a small mountaintop community east of San Diego that had been impacted by the 2003 Cedar Fire, had already voted in 2007 for a \$250 per year parcel tax and consolidated two of its area's fire districts; they were not inclined to support Proposition A and yet another fire-related parcel tax (Krueger 2008a). Moreover, other tax measures on the November 2008 ballot in San Diego County did gather sufficient voter support. Sales tax measures passed in two cities, La Mesa and El Cajon, where Proposition A failed, because they would pay for general purpose city services, which only require a 50 percent threshold of support. All seven of the school bond measures in the county were also successful.

The 2003 and 2007 fires presented San Diego County leaders with windows of opportunity to address future fire threats, and indeed the county has clearly made incremental progress in adopting potential solutions. Many of these policy steps focus on preparation for avoiding or at least minimizing the size and severity of fire events, which is arguably more efficient and less costly in dollars and human suffering than fighting large, catastrophic fires.

Given the inevitability of future wildland fires, political leaders also seized the opportunity offered by the recent fires to offer Proposition A. The 2008 election, they believed, would offer a better chance of getting voter approval and be sufficiently close to the two recent firestorms to link voters' memories of those events with the threat of future events, which might arrive sooner rather than later. In doing so, however, supporters faced an issue that other communities are also likely to face: how to trade off the perceived need for the immediacy of action with the disadvantages of rushing ill-formed or incomplete proposals.

In addition to being well prepared in advance to seize windows of opportunity before they close, communities attempting to raise revenue for wildfire protection and response, would also be well advised to give strong public justifications so that tax measures simply don't appear to be throwing more money at the problem or creating more elaborate bureaucracies when other solutions might be just as viable. Supporters should also be attuned to the need for open and transparent processes as policy proposals are developed. Accountability, demonstrated by a clear picture of



anticipated benefits and tangible outcomes as well as by specific spending plans, can build voter trust that funds are truly needed and will be expended with care. Political leadership with a strategy and a commitment to building supportive coalitions among affected jurisdictions, fire professionals, and a core of community leaders and citizen advocates can aid in minimizing opposition, mobilizing supporters, and securing sufficient campaign financing. In designing future revenue packages supporters must recognize possible rural-urban differences and craft proposals that are viewed by major jurisdictions and their elected officials as politically equitable and target voter education efforts to potential political and economic cleavages that exist within the community. Finally, it cannot be assumed that those who have been, or potentially will be, affected by fire events will support either taxing measures or regulatory measures that impose costs upon them, regardless of their ability to pay.

Proposition A faced a severely weakened economy, a taxpayer imposed requirement for two-thirds voter approval, and the tax-cutting not tax raising philosophy of conservative constituents. Even under these circumstances, however, getting support for new revenue need not be a losing proposition. Despite the context in which the vote occurred and the missteps made by its supporters, Proposition A garnered considerable voter support. The San Diego experience can inform revenue generation strategies not only for San Diego but also for other communities dealing with the challenge of revenue generation for reducing fire risks prior to fire, responding quickly and effectively to fire events, and managing post-fire recovery.

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