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Special districts short of board members

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Two of the six reports issued this week by the Stanislaus County civil grand jury zeroed in on leadership issues in a pair of special districts — the Empire Sanitary District and the Turlock Rural Fire District.

The conclusions about the Empire district were by far the more serious.

The jury found that two previous board members were not residents of the district and were related to each other (mother- daughter). Further, board members had hired relatives to work for the district, a practice that appears unethical. We agree with that perception.

The grand jury report also faulted how district money was being handled as well as the lack of an audit.

In the case of the Turlock fire district, the grand jury was similarly critical of a lax handling of funds in the agency. And it found fault with the fact that some board members have served beyond the two-term limit.

Previously, the 2008-09 grand jury had criticized yet another special district, the tiny Monterey Park Tract Community Services District west of Ceres, because one board member didn't even live in the district. That jury noted that keeping board positions filled was a recurring problem.

Individually, none of these three reports has grabbed much attention, but collectively they suggest a troubling pattern — a shortage of capable people willing to serve on boards of special districts.

For Modesto residents, this isn't really an issue. Virtually all of their services are provided by the city or by Stanislaus County, each of which has a capably functioning governing body.

But rural residents and those in unincorporated towns usually get services from special districts — fire protection from one agency, water and-or sewer from another and so forth.

Under state law, most of these special districts are separate and autonomous entities. So while the temptation is to go to the county with complaints about a special district, the fact is that the county has neither the responsibility nor the authority to intervene. Individually, county supervisors often try to help out, including by recruiting board members when no one steps forward to run or be appointed.

Our democracy is based on citizen participation. That includes not only people choosing their leaders, but also people stepping forward to be the leaders.

Seldom is there a shortage of people wanting to serve in the Legislature or Congress.

But at the most local level — and especially in the case of single- purpose districts — all too often there's a dearth of people willing to serve.

That situation is even more pronounced now, due, in our opinion, to a general cynicism about politicians of all kinds as well as the challenging and painful decisions facing most governing boards.

The two Empire board members criticized in the grand jury report resigned in December. Appointments have been made to fill the vacancies, bringing that board back to full membership.

But around the county there are other special districts with leadership holes.

The county regularly updates its list of board and commission vacancies. As of Thursday, there were 61 seats available.

(For a list of the vacancies, go to <http://www.stancounty.com/>. Click on Board of Supervisors and then Boards, Commissions and Special Districts.)

Citizens often pay little attention to the activities of special districts until there's a major fiasco — or until an agency proposes to raise fees or taxes. That's not good enough.

The grand jury reports of the last two years have highlighted the need for capable people to step forward and serve.

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Phone: (209) 578-2000.