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Truth squad: Alamo cityhood mailers examined

By Lisa Vorderbrueggen
Contra Costa Times

Posted: 02/28/2009 03:28:55 PMPST
Campaign literature is piling up in Alamo mailboxes, where voters will decide March 3 whether to form California's newest city.

The Contra Costa Times periodically examines campaign claims made in fliers and other handout materials.

Here is a selection of statements both for and against Measure A and an analysis of the truthfulness of the assertions.

What it says: "If Measure A passes and Alamo becomes its own town, we will have a town council that is accountable to us."

Is it true? Yes. Alamo voters would elect five members of its town council.

But it is also true that Alamo elects its representative to the board of supervisors, albeit in conjunction with the rest of District 3, which includes voters in Walnut Creek, Danville, San Ramon, Brentwood and other parts of far eastern Contra Costa County.

What it says: "The county can make decisions that change the character of Alamo. Measure A allows us a voice in preserving our small town character."

Is it true? Yes. But it's also true that the county is responsible for the small-town character that proponents of incorporation now seek to preserve.

What it says: "If incorporation succeeds, it is irreversible."

Is it true? No. State law spells out the process for a city to disband. It is rarely used, however. The last city unincorporated in 1972, and others have failed to pull it off. In some cases, cities consolidated instead.

What it says: State law decrees every incorporated community must grow.

Is it true? No. Incorporation could result in zoning changes to accommodate more low to moderate income housing in Alamo. Here's why.

The state requires every city and county to plan housing for a range of incomes.

The amount of housing is based on a negotiated distribution formula derived from the metropolitan region's projected population growth.

In the Bay Area, the state and the Association of Bay Area Governments negotiates the total housing number assigned to the region.

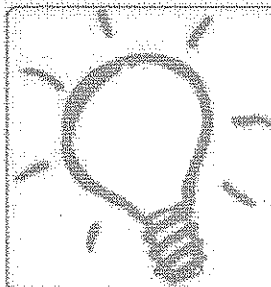
ABAG's staff develops growth projections and its governing board hashes out how to distribute housing across the region.

The idea is to fairly allocate a broad range of housing types, and to allow low- and moderate-income families to live in the communities where they work.

If Alamo incorporates, it will receive what is called a fair-share allocation of the region's projected growth.

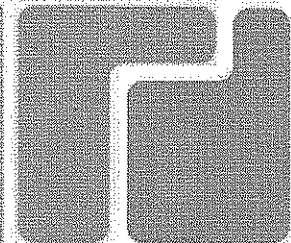
It must accommodate that housing in its general plan and zoning, which could include apartments or

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condos. The law also says cities cannot erect barriers to construction, although the state does not mandate that cities build housing.

Today, Alamo falls under the county's fair-share umbrella.

To date, the county has zoned only a handful of its fair-share housing allocation numbers in this upscale community, largely because high land values make affordable housing projects unlikely here.

What it says: "A five-member autocratic town council and Planning Commission will control 16,700 citizens of our community."

Is it true? No.

An Alamo elected council and its Planning Commission appointees will possess no more control over the population than the county board of supervisors or its appointed Planning Commission.

What it says: "Bringing local government to Alamo will result in more government, not less."

Is it true? It's impossible to predict.

Proponents argue that Alamo will replace existing county services for less money and with fewer people by contracting out most of the work.

Critics rightfully point out that California, and the Bay Area, in particular, has relatively few contract cities.

Whether Alamo successfully deploys a lean contract city model will depend on the skills of a newly elected council and the staff.

What it says: "In order to maintain a high level of public service, Alamo will need to make up for likely revenue deficits by cutting services or asking voters to raise taxes."

Is it true? Yes. But this is true for Alamo residents whether or not Alamo is a town.

As a town, if Alamo experiences deficits, its council will either have to cut costs or ask residents to pay more fees and taxes.

The county has reduced services countywide and it expects even deeper cuts in coming months. Contra Costa Sheriff Warren Rupf has proposed laying off 75 deputies, a move that will affect unincorporated Alamo.

The county is also talking about new fees and taxes. For example, it is contemplating asking voters to pass a 911 utility users tax that would help pay for public safety.

What it says: "In this economic downturn, property tax revenue will be less than projected, requiring cuts in services and a need for new fees and taxes."

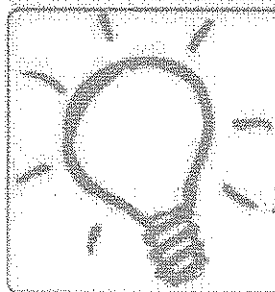
Is it true? It depends. Alamo has the most stable property tax base in the county, according to county Assessor Gus Kramer. The county's tax roll shrank 8 percent last year; Alamo grew 5 percent.

Alamo also has a very low turnover rate, which means many of its property owners pay taxes based on values lower than even reduced market values in the downturn.

On the other hand, the housing market could continue to deteriorate and Alamo isn't immune to it.

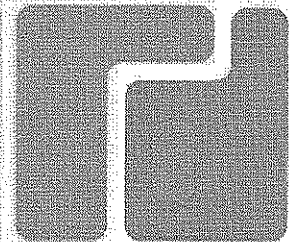
Property taxes make up the largest component of Alamo's budget estimates, about 30 percent, and

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declines could hurt the town's bottom line.

What it says: "The comprehensive fiscal analysis' projected expenses are understated."

Is it true? Yes, in some areas. It is debatable, however, whether the figures are sufficiently out of whack to negate the benefits of incorporation.

For example, critics estimate based on the experience in nearby cities that it could cost upward of \$700,000 to develop a new general plan, housing element and zoning code. The Alamo plan anticipates \$325,000.

The plan also budgets \$120,000 a year for legal costs, a figure critics say will be far higher.

And it assumes a town manager will command a salary of \$132,000 a year, a figure even incorporation proponents agree is too low.

Alamo is one of the toniest real estate markets in the East Bay, and if it wants its CEO to live in town, it will have to pay more.

What it says: "The comprehensive fiscal analysis does not include any road maintenance costs."

Is it true? No. The document clearly identifies \$1 million a year to maintain its 56 miles of roads and shows \$1.9 million for road reserves.

As a city, Alamo will become eligible for its share of road repair dollars approved by voters as part of the countywide sales tax.

However, the definition of road maintenance is definitely Clintonesque: Road work the average resident might call maintenance is considered a capital project.

When it comes time to replace Alamo's roads, it makes little difference whether Alamo is a town or part of the county: Both entities will have to find the money somewhere.

What it says: "The (\$3 million) negotiated with the county is debt burden which, if unpaid, will be assessed to your property tax."

Is it true? No. The county cannot bill property owners directly if the new town fails to pay its debt.

This refers to the state-mandated settlement designed to offset the effect of the tax revenue Contra Costa County will lose if Alamo incorporates and takes those dollars.

Alamo agreed to pay the county \$3 million, no interest included, by June 2019.

If Alamo reneges, the county and the state can divert tax revenue that would otherwise go to the town. This would result in a shortfall for the new town budget but would not increase property owners' individual tax bills.

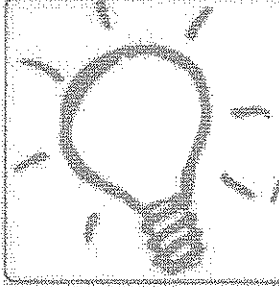
What it says: "If incorporated, Alamo likely will be in the red by year two."

Is it true? It depends on which consultant you believe.

As required by state law, the county agency that oversees incorporation the Local Agency Formation Commission, hired an independent consultant — Winzler & Kelly — to study whether the town could support itself.

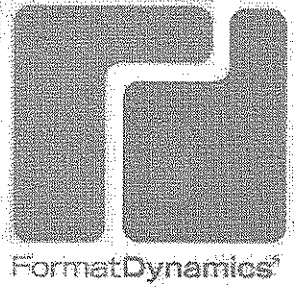
The firm concluded that Alamo would be financially viable based on a set of revenue and expense assumptions. (Critics say the firm used out-of-date numbers but it used 2006 figures, the latest audited

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numbers as required by state law.)

The critics hired McDonald Partners Inc., which prepared a sensitivity analysis that adjusted those assumptions up and down. It found that the town could go belly up in as little as two years.

Reach Lisa Vorderbrueggen at 925-945-4773, lvorderbrueggen@bayareanewsgroup.com or www.ibabuzz.com/politics/ .

Measure A: Online

The Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees boundary matters, has an impartial Web page with information about Alamo's incorporation proposal: www.contracostalafco.org . It includes a chronology of major milestones, the impartial fiscal analysis, environmental review, reports, map and FAQs.

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Voters almost got left out of Tuesday's Alamo incorporation vote

By Eric Louie
San Ramon Valley Times

Posted: 02/27/2009 05:44:34 PMPST
Contra Costa County election workers spent Friday delivering sample ballots and other election materials by hand to a few dozen Alamo voters who were accidentally left off the mailing lists for Tuesday's vote.

Meanwhile, both sides of Measure A, which if passed will incorporate the area into a town, entered their final weekend of campaigning on the hotly debated issue. On the ballot are more than a dozen candidates, most of whom support incorporation, vying for five council seats if the measure passes. The top vote-getters will be elected.

Election services supervisor Sue Olvera said the elections division learned Thursday that 43 voters on the edge of the proposed town's boundary had been overlooked. It affected 23 homes, according to the elections office. The problem was discovered after someone called asking why they did not receive voting materials.

"They didn't get anything," said Olvera, adding that luckily the problem was detected early enough to solve. There are more than 10,000 voters in the area.

Every affected voter was contacted, and arrangements were made for personal delivery, according to the department. Voters who think they should have received a ballot but did not can call

the elections division.

The latest campaign contribution statements show about the same amount of money being spent on both sides of the question

The Yes on A campaign has raised almost \$48,000 this calendar year, including \$17,000 in nonmonetary contributions, according to statements that were due to the county Feb. 19. The campaign has spent about \$31,000.

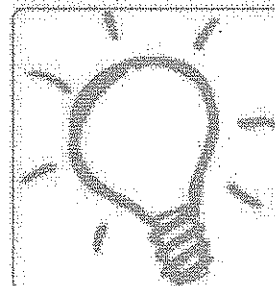
There are two anti-incorporation groups. The We R Alamo campaign against incorporation has received more than \$20,000, three-quarters of which is nonmonetary contributions, with more than \$17,000 spent. Alamo Against A has received about \$26,000, including about \$8,000 in nonmonetary contributions, and spent about \$17,000.

Tony Carnemolla, an anti-incorporation organizer with We R Alamo who has also worked with the other anti-incorporation group, said there are also other small groups working on their own against the incorporation.

Reach Eric Louie at 925-847-2123 or elouie@bayareanewsgroup.com.

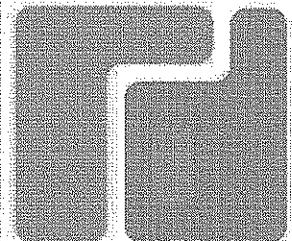
Polls for Tuesday's Alamo incorporation and Town Council votes will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. For more information, including the location of your polling place, go to www.cocovote.us or call 925-335-7800 or 877-335-7802.

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Alamo voters to decide on incorporation, town council

By Eric Louie
Staff Writer

Posted: 03/02/2009 04:53:10 PMPST

ALAMO — Forecasts of rain, wind and possibly hail could play a part in voter turnout today as residents decide whether their unincorporated area of Contra Costa County becomes a town.

Also on today's ballot is who will run the town if incorporation is successful. Polls will be open from 7 a.m. until 8 p.m.

Measure A, which will incorporate Alamo into a town if passed, has been hotly debated. Arguments for incorporation include local control and getting more services than currently given by the county, which serves the area and is facing its own financial problems.

Proponents say tax revenue, mostly from property taxes, is more stable in this area than in most of county and that a town of Alamo could get labor cheaper than county workers.

Arguments against incorporation include the contention that financial projections supporting incorporation are not realistic, and that the new town could have to cut services or ask residents to pay new taxes.

Incorporation opponents, who say they already get good service from the county, also believe problems will grow worse as the state cuts funding to counties and cities.

Voters will also decide on the elected leaders

running the town if the incorporation effort is successful.

The 16 candidates on the ballot are Diane Barley, Bob Connelly, Dennis Johnson, Vicki Koc, Karen McPherson, Steve Mick, Vish More, Kevin Morrow, John Morrow, Randall Nahas, Karl Niyati, Joe Rubay, Grace Schmidt, Roger Smith, Brad Stribling and Brad Waite. Stribling has since dropped out of the race.

All candidates support incorporation except for the Morrrows, a father and son. Neither has worked on the anti-incorporation campaigns.

Koc, Nahas, Connelly, Mick, Schmidt, More and Rubay said they have actively worked toward incorporation or are involved in the incorporation campaign.

McPherson, Smith, Barley, Niyati, Waite, Stribling and Johnson support incorporation, Johnson "cautiously" so.

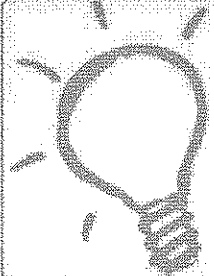
While some candidates have endorsed others, there are no clear alliances, with many running independently.

Bad weather likely will have an effect on voter turnout. The National Weather Service is forecasting showers and possibly a thunderstorm which could include light hail and gusty winds. A south wind around 17 mph, with gusts up to 23 mph is also predicted. Showers are expected at night.

Reach Eric Louie at 925-847-2123 or elouie@bayareanewsgroup.com

Alamo election
Polls for Alamo incorporation Measure A and Town Council votes will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. today. For more information, including

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Editorial: Endorsements for Alamo and Orinda

BAY AREA NEWS GROUP

Posted: 02/27/2009 12:01:00 AM PST
IN TWO EAST Bay communities, Alamo and Orinda, Tuesday is Election Day.

It's the sort of election that might pass unnoticed if residents aren't paying attention. But the stakes are high. The outcomes will have major effects on the futures of the respective communities.

Voters who are not casting absentee ballots should be sure to get to the polls on Tuesday.

If you have questions about where to go, call 925-335-7800. Or check the Contra Costa County Elections Office Web site, www.cocovote.us. The Web site also has information about the measures and candidates on the ballot.

Absentee voters need to immediately mail in their ballots or take them to a polling location on Tuesday. To be counted, the absentee ballots must be received by 8 p.m. Election Day. And, remember, absentee ballots will not be counted if there is no signature on the return envelope.

As for the Times' recommendations:

Yes on Alamo Measure A. The 16,700 residents of the unincorporated community of Alamo will be better off with their own city government and, consequently, should support Measure A, which provides for incorporation of the town. Voters should realize that they will be getting a trim government, under which most services will be provided under contract rather than by city

employees. Nevertheless, Alamo, with its strong property tax base, will be better served by local representatives than under the current system of county management.

At the same time that Alamo voters decide whether to incorporate their town, they will be selecting five people to serve on the first City Council if Measure A passes. There are 16 candidates, many of whom are well-qualified for the job. But there are five standouts who have worked hard on the incorporation drive and understand the fiscal and organizations challenges the new city will face. They are: Steve Mick, Grace Schmidt, Bob Connelly, Randall Nahas and Vicki Koc.

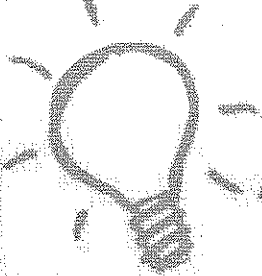
Yes on Orinda Measure B. Orinda residents benefit tremendously from excellent schools that turn out exceptional students and provide the foundation for the community's strong property values. So voters should support the Measure B parcel tax to protect their investments in their children and their homes.

But they should cast their ballots with full knowledge of the costs. Measure B would increase the parcel tax 32 percent from \$385 to \$509 annually for each property to help with the cost of kindergarten through eighth-grade education. The tax is just one of several that residents pay to fund education in the Orinda district and the Acalanes Union High School District. If Measure B passes, the owner of an Orinda home assessed at \$1 million would pay a total of \$1,234 a year in extra school fees for the two districts.

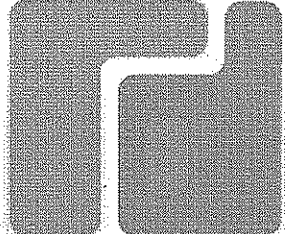
The Measure B money would be used to help cover ongoing costs of running the district, including teacher salaries, class-size reduction and offsetting reductions in state budget cuts.

While we endorse Measure B, we encourage Orinda school trustees to use the money judiciously — to


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Alamo voters reject incorporation measure

By Eric Louie
San Ramon Valley Times

Posted: 03/03/2009 10:44:25 PMPST

Updated: 03/04/2009 06:41:41 AMPST

ALAMO — Voters rejected a measure Tuesday that would have incorporated Alamo into a town.

With all precincts reporting, 66 percent of the 6,173 votes counted opposed Measure A, according to the Contra Costa County Elections Division. The final vote was 2,099 in favor to 4,074 against.

Alamo would have become the first Contra Costa County town to incorporate since Oakley voted to do so more than a decade ago.

Turnout was high at the portable building at Creekside Community Church, said precinct inspector Marty Hess. The polling place is the voting spot for 1,850 voters, with 70 percent listed as absentee, he said. By 5 p.m. more than 300 people had come in to cast their ballot.

"That's more than half," Hess said. "This is very similar to the presidential election."

If the number of signs along Danville Boulevard are any indication, the issue certainly has roused voter interest. Voters leaving the polls offered mixed opinions, with a slightly higher number saying they were against incorporation. Donald and Dawn Davis drove up with their two sons in a sport utility vehicle with "We Voted No!" written on a side window.

"We want to keep it rural," said Dawn Davis, 38, a housewife who grew up in Walnut Creek. "We moved here because it was unincorporated."

They've lived in Alamo four years.

"I just don't like the idea of increasing taxes and increasing bureaucracy," said Donald Davis, 34, a general contractor.

Kevin Anderson, 47, a self-employed Alamo resident of eight years, voted for incorporation.

"It gives more local control," he said.

Arguments for incorporation included local control and getting more services than currently provided by the county, which serves the area and is facing its own financial problems. Proponents said tax revenue, mostly from property taxes, would be more stable in this area than in most of county and that as a town, Alamo could get labor cheaper than the county can.

Opponents contended that financial projections supporting incorporation are not realistic, and that the new town might have to cut services or ask residents to pay new taxes.

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