



Some Cabazon residents want city

INCORPORATION: The water board president says he wants to protect the community.

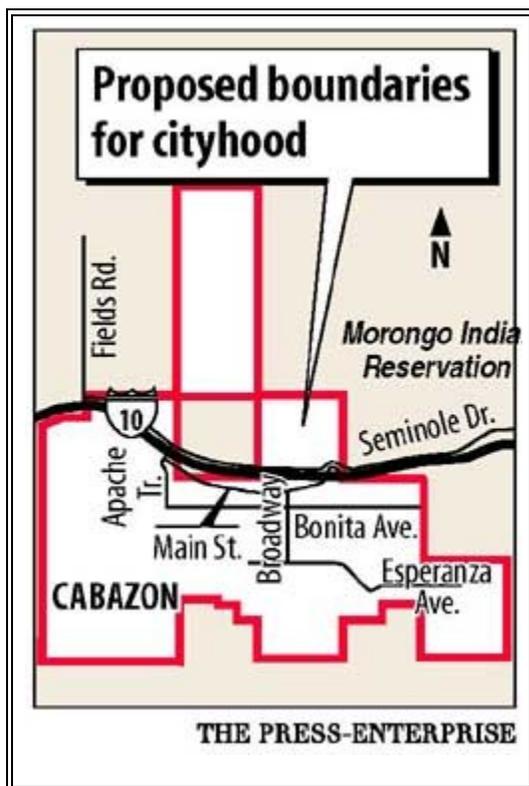
12:38 PM PDT on Friday, June 4, 2004

By STEVE MOORE / The Press-Enterprise

CABAZON - More than 30 years ago, Cabazon made history.

The tiny, windswept town of 600 people built around a poker casino became the first and only community to give up cityhood in Riverside County.

Scandal, political instability and stalled growth plagued Cabazon from its birth in 1955 to its demise in 1972.



Now, unincorporated Cabazon may give cityhood another try.

The town of about 3,000 people along the freeway between Palm Springs and Banning sits in the shadow of popular outlet malls and a soon-to-be opened \$250 million gaming resort, including a 23-story hotel, operated by the Morongo Band of Mission Indians.

On Thursday, Cabazon County Water District board President Harvey Williamson mailed an open letter to the community. Only incorporation can prevent the Indians from gobbling up Cabazon, he said.

The Morongo "want the community of Cabazon and they are going to keep at it until they succeed in getting it," he wrote.

"There is only one sure way for us to block their efforts, and that is for Cabazon to become a city."

Waltona Manion, a public relations consultant for the tribe, disagrees.

"The tribe has no plans now or in the future to acquire Cabazon," she said. "The Morongos are very proud of their many contributions to improve the quality of life in Cabazon."

Williamson mailed the letter at water district expense to about 600 homes in Cabazon. A public meeting on incorporation is set for 7:30 p.m. Monday at the Jim Venable Community Center, 50390 Carmen Ave.

Williamson said the incorporation effort is not a one-man campaign and shared the letter with other community leaders, who offered their own suggestions.

A wastewater treatment plant now being built on the reservation is an attempt to control water for building in the surrounding Cabazon area, Williamson said. It would do away with plans by the Cabazon County Water District for treating sewage in unincorporated areas off the reservation, he said.

Williamson's letter also says 5th District Supervisor Marion Ashley and a major developer are working on plans for a master-planned community that would transform Cabazon. Enough land has been tied up for 8,000 to 10,000 homes, shopping centers and other related building, he said.

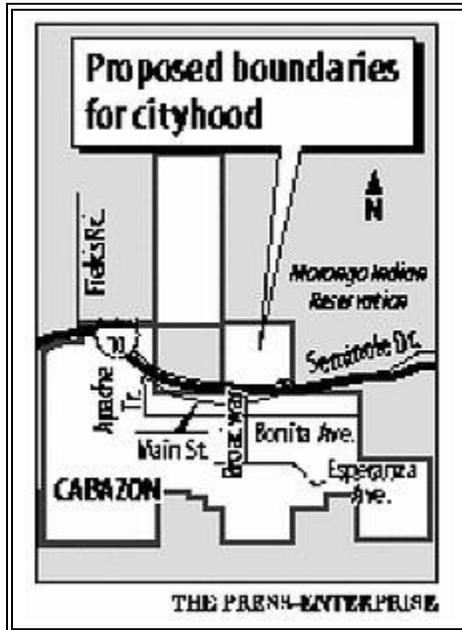
Danny Brose, general manager Colorado Pacific Communities and Cabazon LLC, could not be reached for comment Thursday about Williamson's letter.

Developers and the future

Meanwhile, Cabazon continues attracting interest from developers, Ashley said. He has talked to several, but no applications are pending.

"Cabazon's day is here or right on the horizon," Ashley said. "It's going to continue to develop."

Both Ashley and the tribe called Williamson's letter inaccurate on many points and divisive.



Williamson said if the tribe controlled the only wastewater treatment plant in the nearby area, it would have tremendous influence over development and wouldn't "treat us (Cabazon) fairly," Williamson said. And the tribe also talked to a developer about supplying drinking water for a housing development off the reservation, he said.

The water district plans its own sewage treatment plant, Williamson said, and it could be expanded as Cabazon grows.

Manion said the tribe's wastewater treatment plant would not interfere with any plans the Cabazon County Water District may have for a similar facility.

Becoming a city

Over the last decade, forming a new city has become very difficult.

Under the law, California counties can't lose revenue because of incorporation - unless they agree to that through negotiations. The outlet malls in Cabazon would provide much of the new city's revenue.

Ashley said any revenue agreement would have to be negotiated.

George Spiliotis, executive officer of the Riverside County Local Agency Formation Commission, said four to six new cities were once formed each year. But only about a dozen were formed since 1994, he said.

There are now 24 cities in Riverside County.

Williamson met with the LAFCO official recently and discussed incorporation details. Water district funds would pay for incorporation studies and other related costs.

Several steps are involved.

A preliminary feasibility study is required, along with an application to LAFCO. A more comprehensive feasibility study is also necessary - something that could cost Cabazon about \$35,000 to \$75,000. Twenty-five percent of registered voters - about 200 of the 800 - have to sign a petition in support of incorporation.

The LAFCO staff then reviews the cityhood request - which could cost Cabazon about \$10,000 to \$20,000. LAFCO holds a hearing and if the agency recommends incorporation, an election is held.

It takes a majority vote to form a city.

Ashley said he won't take sides in any incorporation debate. He will support whatever a majority of residents and landowners want when it comes to cityhood.

"I know someday Cabazon will be a city, a very good city," he said. "It's just a matter of when.

"If not soon, it will certainly be within a few years."