Accord sought over Sagebrush issue

Glendale and La Canada may revisit history in negotiating decades-long battle over school district boundaries.

November 01, 2013 | By Kelly Corrigan, kelly.corrigan@latimes.com

In the early 1990s, they called themselves the Sagebrush Committee, and their catalyst was Rose McCoppin.

As a La Cañada resident living in the Sagebrush, McCoppin was forced to pull her son out of La Cañada's Palm Crest Elementary after Glendale Unified denied her request to allow her son, Kevin, to attend La Cañada schools.

By the time Glendale Unified reversed its stance and issued her an interdistrict permit, McCoppin had enrolled her son in a private school. But that didn't stop her efforts to rally the neighbors to learn how they could transfer the westernmost area of La Cañada, an area that had had been served by Glendale schools for decades, to La Cañada Unified.

About 15 residents met for the first time at McCoppin's home in October of 1991. During the following weeks, McCoppin attended Glendale school board meetings and even told then-Supt. Robert Sanchis, “I want you to release us.”

He said, ‘Ma'am, do you know Glendale people?’ McCoppin recalled him saying during an interview this week. “We're very good people....You should very glad and excited.’"

Nevertheless, in November of 1991, the Sagebrush Committee filed a petition with the Los Angeles County Committee on School District Organization, which in 1992 voted to approve the transfer.

But that approval was short lived; Glendale Unified filed an appeal with the California State Board of Education, which sided with Glendale.

By 1997, the La Cañada residents, frustrated over the board's decision, now working under the title “Unite La Cañada Flintridge,” continued to pursue the transfer, according to the a Los Angeles Times story.
Ultimately, their request to overturn the state board of education’s decision was denied.

“Everybody was disappointed,” McCoppin recalled this week. “All that hard work went to nothing.”

It wasn't the first attempt by Sagebrush residents to become part of the La Cañada Unified School District.

In 1979, hopeful residents turned in 450 signatures of registered Sagebrush voters to the Los Angeles County Board of Education, according to the Los Angeles Times. They were led by Judy Gabelman, according to records that current La Cañada school board President Scott Tracy discovered in district archives.

But in 1980, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors denied the petition, Tracy said.

When La Cañada incorporated in 1976, La Cañada Unified was already 15 years old. Tracy said that with the city's establishment, residents sought to transfer the Sagebrush territory to La Cañada Unified, spurring the ultimately unsuccessful effort three years later.

But the reason for the school district boundary lines not matching the city's remain unclear, however.

“For whatever reason that boundary was set there, it did not correlate between the historical boundary of the two cities,” Tracy said.

A renewed effort

Tom Smith, who lives in the Sagebrush neighborhood, but does not have children attending Glendale or La Cañada schools, said he was approached by neighbors to take up the cause last spring.

“I think they saw I had too much time on my hands and they decided to give me an issue that is very important to us as a neighborhood,” he told the Glendale school board in mid-October.

As chair of “Unite LCF” — the name is a nod to the 1990s committee — Smith said residents seek a transfer to achieve community cohesiveness.

“The children and the students that live in this area are now forced to divide their attention, their time, their passions, between their school and their community,” he said at the meeting.

Smith also has overwhelming support in La Cañada's elected officials.
La Cañada City Councilman Don Voss said that since he joined the council in 2006, residents have voiced concern over the territory.

In June, the city council passed a unanimous resolution to support the transfer.

“We're very supportive of it because we support our residents and our residents want this to happen,” Voss said this week.

Due to La Cañada Unified's ability to absorb more students now than the 1990s push, La Cañada officials believe the timing for a renewed effort is right.

There are currently 600 students enrolled in La Cañada Unified who come from out of the area, as the district has more capacity than it has local residents.

“The question is ‘Why, to what end?’” Tracy asked. “The end is so that we can collectively foster and support greater involvement and student achievement that we couldn't otherwise realize.”

In Glendale, however, school officials are uncertain how they would collect taxes to pay for the school bonds that Sagebrush residents voted on, if the territory were to transfer.

What's at stake

Glendale school officials have said they could lose up to 400 students to the transfer and $3.6 million in state revenue by 2018. In La Cañada, however, officials have said 260 students would be affected.

In October, about 200 parents showed up at Mountain Avenue to hear Glendale Unified Supt. Dick Sheehan speak about the transfer process.

Parents concerned over the future of Mountain Avenue told the Glendale school board they want to weigh in on whether Mountain Avenue would turn into a magnet school for the arts or sciences or remain a neighborhood school, should the transfer occur.

The school has 145 Sagebrush residents. Officials on both sides say they would carefully plan for the school’s future, should Mountain Avenue lose those students.

Glendale Unified currently receives $46 per assessed $100,000 in property taxes each year to pay for Measure S, a $270-million school bond voters approved two years ago. If Glendale Unified loses the Sagebrush area, it would lose about $500 million in assessed value, and about $210,000 in property taxes each year.

If La Cañada Unified succeeds in folding the Sagebrush properties into its district, a proposed $450 parcel tax collected from about 870 parcels in the area would provide La Cañada schools an additional $391,000 per year. LCUSD is preparing to put the parcel
tax on the March 2014 ballot, which would be voted on in all areas of the city served by the district.

What’s next

Sheehan said this week that Glendale and La Cañada school officials are still in negotiations over the territory.

“The discussions have been very positive in nature,” he said. “However, whether a settlement will happen remains to be seen.”

Tracy acknowledged that while there is no guarantee both districts can come to an agreement, he said they would benefit by reaching an agreement, he said.

Tracy said a potential agreement could possibly entail relocating Sagebrush students into La Cañada Unified over a six-year period.

“It's not in anybody's interest to have those students transfer in one moment in time,” Tracy said.

Glendale school board member Mary Boger hopes the districts can reach an agreement. The majority of Glendale school board members have suggested making the area an open-enrollment one, giving parents the choice which district to add their children to, and Boger favors that approach.

“I hope that we will be able to negotiate a reasonable settlement,” she said.

As the two school districts continue to negotiate, the Los Angeles County Committee on School District Organization also waits for an outcome.

Should the school districts fail to meet an agreement, the Sagebrush residents could file a petition with the committee, according to Keith Crafton, an official with the committee.

The committee is made up of 11 members who are elected by representatives of 94 school and college governing boards in Los Angeles County. Two members are selected in each of the county's five supervisorial districts, with one elected at-large.

La Cañada school board member Joel Peterson holds one of the fifth supervisorial district seats.

During an August school board meeting, when the La Cañada school board adopted a resolution supporting the transfer, Peterson abstained from voting, stating he wanted to preserve his ability to vote on the issue if it came before the county committee.

Crafton said the committee’s legal department is currently reviewing whether or not Peterson could vote on the issue.
Peterson did not return requests for his comment for this story. His term on the committee expires in 2016.

In considering the decades-long dispute over the territory, Crafton hopes the two school districts reach an agreement on their own, and therefore bypass the county committee.

“Maybe this thing will be put to rest forever,” he said.
Palmdale can vote, but will it count? Court to decide

By Jean Merl

Palmdale voters can cast their ballots in the city election Tuesday. They can even find out the results. But it will be up to the courts to decide whether the election is legitimate.

Voters can choose from among four candidates for mayor and fill two seats on the City Council from among another four candidates. But because of an ongoing lawsuit, the winning candidates cannot be seated unless the courts say so.

A Superior Court judge ruled last summer that Palmdale's at-large system of electing city officials was in violation of the California Voting Rights Act in that it denied minorities the opportunity to elect a candidate of their choosing. In October, while he was trying to decide what steps Palmdale should take to remedy the situation. Judge Mark V. Mooney granted the plaintiffs' request to halt the election.

An appellate court allowed the election to proceed but made it clear it would decide after the balloting whether the results could be certified.

Since then, the city has been pulling out all the stops to let voters know they can cast their ballots Tuesday, running radio, TV and local newspaper ads as well as using Facebook and message street signs.

Other Palmdale area elections--including those for four school districts, the Antelope Valley Community College District and the Quartz Hill Water District, are not included in the appellate court matter.

The Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder/County Clerk is handling the Palmdale elections, along with those in scores of other local city, school board and special districts races Tuesday.

"Because of the late actions by the court, the city council [and mayor] contest will appear on the ballot," according to Elizabeth Knox, public information officer for the registrar's office. The county will tabulate those votes and report the result, she added, but "the city is ordered not to certify that result."
The appellate court promised it would settle the certification question "on a priority basis."

Meantime, the trial court is preparing to issue its remedy for the voting rights act violations. The city has said it will appeal once the trial court acts.
LA QUINTA — A mid-valley school board will pursue a plan to divide its district into five voting zones, limiting the power of individual voters but ultimately ensuring more widespread representation by the Desert Sands Unified school board.

Tuesday night in a 4-1 vote, the board approved a proposal to create voting zones. The proposal must now be approved by either a Riverside County education committee or added to the ballot in the future.

Desert Sands Superintendent Gary Rutherford said the district will send the proposal to the county committee, seeking a waiver that makes it unnecessary to take the decision to voters.

If the proposal is approved, the voters in each trustee area will elect only one board member in future elections.

Board members are currently elected via at-large voting, which allows any voter to vote for any candidate regardless of where they live in the district. This system permits board members to live near each other. Trustee areas would require that they be spread evenly throughout the school district.

“There has been a lack of representation in the Indio and north Indio areas,” said board member Donald Griffith, who supported the proposal. “If we go to voting areas, we will definitely have equal representation throughout the valley.”
The election shift is intended to pre-empt a potential racial discrimination lawsuit. In some areas of California, school districts that use at-large voting have been successfully sued for millions of dollars after they were accused of violating the California Voting Rights Act. The act forbids at-large voting when it dilutes the voting power of minority groups. No such lawsuit has been filed against Desert Sands Unified, but board members have said they believe it is only a matter of time.

Still, the trustee areas have sparked the concerns of the teachers union. Mona Davidson, president of the Desert Sands Teachers Association, said teachers and parents have a stake in the entire board, not just a single member.

“My biggest concern is that every one of the teachers are impacted by every board member,” Davidson said. “And yet, using myself as an example, in 2014 I won’t be able to vote for board members because of where I live. I won’t be able to vote until 2016, when the person in my area is up for re-election.”

Davidson also worries that the trustee areas will “weaken the candidate pool.” If two or three qualified candidates live in the same neighborhood, voters would be forced to choose only one, even if they prefer to elect them all, she said.

Voters may face this conundrum in 2016. If approved, the shift would make political rivals of current board members Matt Monica and Wendy Jonathan, who, because of where they live, would have to compete for a single seat if the trustee areas are approved. The remaining seat would go to someone from a heavily Latino neighborhood in Indio where no current board member lives.

Monica was the only board member to oppose the plan for trustee areas. He said constituents urged him to defend at-large voting, and although his opposition had nothing to do with where board members live, he does believe trustee areas would create “conflict and competition” on the board.
UPDATE: School Elections Net Mixed Results For Incumbents, Challengers

Wed, 11/06/2013 - 1:32am | Perry Smith

A challenger managed to unseat an incumbent in one of three local school board elections held Tuesday, according to results on Los Angeles County Registrar Recorder website.

The Newhall, Saugus Union and Sulphur Springs school districts all held elections Tuesday. KHTS AM-1220 followed the results live on our Santa Clarita elections page, which also contained links to the candidate forums.

Sulphur Springs School District

Ken Chase, a certified management accountant who said his skills in finance would be an asset to the board in a Sulphur Springs candidate forum last month, also managed to convince enough voters that was the case.

In fact, Chase was the leading vote-getter for the Sulphur Springs School District, garnering 1,263 votes, compared to Lori MacDonald and Kerry Clegg.

"I would have been happy at No. 3, but I'm thrilled to be No.1," Chase said, adding that he was very fortunate to have friends and family who helped him get the word out.

Chase said he's been involved with the district since 2004 attending meetings and also participating in a site council, and had a great respect for fellow board members and Sulphur Springs Superintendent Robert Nolet.

He looked forward to working collaboratively with the board, and hoped to creat a "more well-rounded perspective" to the Canyon Country school board.

MacDonald, an LAUSD teacher, was an incumbent appointee who filled the seat vacated by Sheldon Wigdor, who moved to Cleveland last year.
She earned 1,140 votes, good for 25.7 percent of votes cast.

Clegg, a four-time board president who’s served continuously since he was first elected in 1989, came in third with 1,139.

The top-three votegetters earned spots on the board.

Chase and the two incumbents left incumbent Michael Hogan, CEO of Hogan Communications, an entertainment-based advertising company, as the odd man out.

Hogan earned 995 votes, good for 22.43 percent of the vote.

There are 31,711 registered voters for the Sulphur Springs School District, according to Los Angeles County figures.

**Saugus Union School District**

Challenger Chris Trunkey came within 49 votes of unseating an incumbent in the Saugus Union School District.

At a Saugus Union candidate forum hosted by the local media outlets, Trunkey used his question to put incumbent Doug Bryce on the spot about a controversial PTA mailer that was used by all three incumbents.

The strategy nearly worked, except voters decide to keep the three incumbents in office after all.

Board President Judy Umeck, who earned her fourth term, led with 2,328 votes, or 26.96 percent of the turnout.

Moreso than ever before, social media played a big role in this year’s election, which Umeck expects to grow in importance.

"I was living the life of the student and trying to navigate social media and the networking," Umeck said. "I truly became a student in that process."

Umeck received the most amount of votes of anyone running for office in the Santa Clarita Valley this time around, as the leading vote-getter in the largest district on the ballot.

"I would say social media is a huge part of it, but I wouldn't discount face-to-face contact with voters," she added. "I still think that's very important."

For Umeck, the reason she continues to run is the site visit, and the "a-ha moment" that she gets to observe in students on her trips to campuses.

Paul De La Cerda, who earned his third win on the Saugus Union board, came in second with 2,078 votes, or 24 percent of the votes cast.

Bryce garnered 1,678 votes, 19.4 percent of the vote, which was good enough for a fourth term on the Saugus Union School District governing board.
The Saugus Union School District currently is a four-person board while it awaits word from the attorney general on whether they may formally proceed with their intention to remove Stephen Winkler from office.

The board voted 4-1 to vacate Winkler’s seat in June regarding an allegation that Winkler maintained a residence outside of the district.

There are 58,989 registered voters for the Saugus Union School District election.

Newhall School District

Board President Christy Smith was the top vote-getter for the Newhall School District race.

Smith grabbed 1,733 votes, which was good for slightly more than 28 percent of the turnout.

The former Peachland Elementary student who also served as a policy analyst for the U.S. Department of Education, earned her second term on the board with the win.

Attorneys Phil Ellis and Brian Walters also earned re-election, by picking up 1,562 votes and 1,547 votes, respectively.

Ellis was first elected to the board in November 1995, then served a four-year term on the William S. Hart Union High School District, then ran for Newhall again in November 2009.

Walters began his first term as an appointment to replace J. Michael McGrath, who resigned in December 2009.

There are 40,158 registered voters for the Newhall School District race.
Incumbents win in Downey school board races

By Arnold Adler, Staff Writer

School board incumbents in the Downey Unified School District faced competition in the Tuesday election for the first time in at least six years, but still won easily, according to unofficial listings from the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters Office.

Two incumbents were re-elected to the board of the Bellflower Unified School District while three incumbents were returned in the Norwalk-La Mirada School District, but a fourth, longtime board member Ed Hengler, was defeated.

Downey had a new voting procedure this year. Board members were always required to live in the districts they represented, but they were voted into office districtwide. This time the voting was limited to each district.

In Area 1, incumbent Martha Sodentani, first elected in 2005, defeated challenger Victor M. Malagon, an industrial electrician, by a large 605-vote-to-65-vote margin.

The area is in the northwest part of the district and includes part of Bell Gardens.

In Area 5, incumbent Nancy Swenson, also first elected in 2005, defeated John N. Anagnostou, an electrician, 372 to 111.

The area is the southwest part of the district.
In Area 7, incumbent Barbara Rae Samperi, first elected in 1993, had three opponents but was re-elected with 346 votes or 60.81 percent, of the ballots cast.

Betty Luz Monroy of Downey, a member of the city library advisory board, received 131 votes while Bellflower resident Bertha Rath Valenzuela, a retired bilingual teacher with the county Office of Education in Downey, had 64 votes and Leslie Jane Valencia, a college graduate and banker, also a Bellflower resident, received 28.

The area is in the southeast part of the district and includes part of Bellflower.

Bellflower Unified School District incumbents Laura Sanchez-Ramirez of Lakewood and Paul L. Helzer of Bellflower were re-elected and will be joined by challenger Sue S. Elhessen, an educator and businesswoman from Bellflower.

Appointed incumbent Don McMackin of Bellflower filed July 15 but dropped out of the race.

Sanchez-Ramirez received 1,094 votes or 19.42 percent, to edge Elhessen who had 1,082 or 19.2 percent. Helzer received 1,005 or 17.84 percent.

Out of the running were Sean Bookout, a parent and police officer from Lakewood; Ted Edmiston, a chiropractor and former member of the Cerritos College Board of Trustees, who lives in Bellflower; and Angela Parrish, a parent and court reporter, from Bellflower.

Norwalk-La Mirada incumbents who won were Margarita Rios, who received 2,128 votes; Darryl R. Adams, 1,965 votes; and Ana A. Valencia, 1,637 votes, all of Norwalk.

Joining them will be Sean M. Reagan, a government teacher, 1,758 votes, also of Norwalk.

Out of the running were Salvador Limon, a teacher and student, 1,460 votes; Hengler, 1,428 votes; and Mark Owen White, a field technician engineer, 959. All are from La Mirada.

In the Little Lake City School District, incumbents George S. Buchanan of Norwalk, with 943 votes; and Hilda Zamora of Santa Fe Springs, 1,270 votes; were re-elected, defeating Dora Sandoval, a student and parent from Norwalk, who had 916 votes.
Three incumbents in the Paramount Unified School district were unopposed for their seats this year.

They are Alicia M. Linden Anderson and Anthony Pena, both of Paramount; and Sonya S. Cuellar, of Bellflower, an administrator in the Little Lake City District.
Coachella Valley Water District to scrap at-large election system

Change comes after group challenged current vote system as unfair

Nov. 13, 2013
Written by Ian James

The Desert Sun

PALM DESERT — The Coachella Valley Water District voted to scrap its at-large election system on Tuesday after a complaint by a group of voters that argued the system violated the California Voting Rights Act and was unfair to Latino residents.

The water agency’s five-member board voted unanimously to make the change, joining a growing list of cities and school districts across California that have similarly altered how elections are held in response to legal challenges.

Civil rights lawyers Robert Rubin and Megan Beaman, who represent a group of several voters, had notified the water board of their concerns last month and threatened to sue. They welcomed the agency’s response, while also saying they hope more is done to ensure Latino voters have adequate say and representation.

“This is what we hoped for. This is what the residents of the Coachella Valley are entitled to,” Rubin said in a telephone interview. He and Beaman said the water agency should next review the lines that separate its voting districts and involve the community through hearings to make sure the system is fair.

In previous elections, each member of the water agency’s board has been required to live within one of the five divisions, but voters throughout the area have voted at-large
for all candidates. Under the ordinance approved Tuesday, board members will now be elected by voters of a single division.

The Coachella Valley Water District, which has about 108,000 customers, serves an area spanning roughly 1,000 square miles from Cathedral City to communities around the Salton Sea. Latino residents make up more than one-third of the voting age population in the area, but all of the water district’s board members are white.

“It was something that was due to come,” said Franz De Klotz, the board’s vice president. “While I have always thought of myself as representing the whole Coachella Valley, now it’s going to be a little bit more concentrated.”

Beaman and Rubin have argued that political power on the water board is linked to the longstanding problem of inadequate water and sewer service in poor communities of the eastern valley.

While new housing developments are required to cover the costs of building water and sewer lines, dozens of mobile home parks without water service have proliferated in the farmland of the eastern valley. Most of the trailer parks rely on septic tanks and private wells, some of which are contaminated with arsenic and other pollutants.

The water district’s officials have touted their efforts to help by seeking federal and state grants to pay for water systems for rural communities. De Klotz said he even donated his own money to help provide water filters for one mobile home park.

John Powell, the board’s president, said in a statement that the lawyers raised serious issues that had to be addressed. “I don’t want any of the district’s constituents to feel like they aren’t fairly represented, so I wholeheartedly support the change,” Powell said.

General Manager Jim Barrett recommended the switch in the electoral process, saying it would both provide better representation and sidestep a potentially expensive lawsuit.

In response to other possible lawsuits, the Desert Sands Unified School Board recently announced plans to change its election system, and the Palm Springs Unified School District is considering a similar change.

Rubin, who helped draft the Voting Rights Act of 2001, has since been involved in lawsuits across the state against cities such as Modesto, Anaheim and Palmdale, and
recently reached a settlement in a suit against San Mateo County. The San Francisco attorney said the challenge to the water district’s system was his first focusing on a special district, and he called it “an important base of power.”

The lawyers are representing seven individuals and a committee of owners and managers of mobile home parks along Pierce Street in Thermal.
If the Palm Springs Unified school board adopts proposed trustee areas, current board members Justin Blake and Karen Cornett will have to face off if they both seek re-election.

The proposal, presented during a board meeting Tuesday night, would also guarantee that future school boards include one member from Desert Hot Springs, which hasn’t elected a board candidate in recent years.

Palm Springs Unified school board is scheduled to vote on the trustee area proposal during a Nov. 26 meeting.

Like many California school districts, Palm Springs Unified is considering a plan to abandon at-large elections, carving the district into voting zones to avoid a potentially costly lawsuit over racial discrimination.

Currently, the school board elects members through at-large voting, which allows any voter to vote for any candidate regardless of where they live in the school district. This permits school board members to live in close proximity but represent the entire school district.

Under a trustee area system, the school district would be carved into five voting zones, each with about 33,000 residents. One board member would be elected by the residents of each zone, assuring members come from all corners of the district.
Blake and Cornett, who live about 3 miles apart, fall into the same voting zone, according to a draft map of the trustee areas presented at the board meeting. Therefore, if the trustee areas are adopted as proposed, these current board members would have to compete over a single seat in future elections, possibly as soon as 2014.

Blake openly opposed the proposal, but said he expected to be outvoted by his board colleagues.

“I think we all understand the law and how it works and how we got here, I just think it is so morally wrong to chop the district up using race as a factor when we work so hard in the '60s and '70s and '80s to let people be equal,” Blake said. “I will not vote for this. And I apologize to all of you if it means we lose some taxpayer dollars. ... I would rather stand on principle.”

Cornett was absent from the board meeting. No other board member spoke in favor or in opposition of the proposal. Board President Shari Steward said the proposal would be a “difficult decision.”

The election shift is intended to pre-empt a potentially costly lawsuit that claims racial discrimination. In some areas of California, school districts that use at-large voting have been successfully sued for millions of dollars after they were accused of violating the California Voting Rights Act. The act forbids at-large voting when it dilutes the voting power of minority groups.

This lawsuit threat has prompted similar election transformations from the Coachella Valley Water District and the Desert Sands Unified School District, both of which abandoned at-large voting out of fear that they would be sued.

Due to the new trustee areas in Desert Sands, two current board members — Matt Monica and Wendy Jonathan — will be forced to face off in future elections. Monica and Jonathan live close to each other in Palm Desert, so if they both run for re-election in 2016, they will have to compete for a single seat on the board.

The transition to a trustee area election can be pursued in two ways, said attorney Todd Robbins, who briefed the Palm Springs Unified board on its options on Tuesday night.
The school district could pay for a liability study, a complex data-driven legal review that determines if the district is at risk of losing a lawsuit, or it could skip the study and simply transition to the regional election regardless.

If the board decides to create trustee areas, the proposal must be approved by a county education committee — or seek approval from voters — before it can become official.

The county committee is required to hold at least one public hearing in the district before it can decide on the proposal. The whole process takes about four to six months.