

Policy Brief

Marin City Representation in County-level Decisions

Strengthening the Community's Political Voice

Statement of Issue

Marin City is an unincorporated community in Southern Marin County with a population of approximately 4,000. Marin City was developed for housing starting in 1942, to accommodate war-time shipyard workers and other immigrants to California. After World War II the area became predominantly African-American, as white residents were able to move freely to private housing elsewhere in Marin. Since the 1980s, additional development has changed the makeup of the population and advanced gentrification in the area.

Marin City has a local government, namely the Marin City Community Services District (MCCSD). The District was formed in 1958 under California Special District law and is currently responsible for providing public street lighting, refuse collection, and parks and recreation services. Because of its unincorporated status, the Marin County Board of Supervisors is responsible for setting most public policies for Marin City. The Board of Supervisors, as a regional body, do not always solely have Marin City's interests in mind when making policy in Marin City.

Unincorporated areas such as Marin City tend not to receive the same level of service from their County government comparable to services provided by Cities. Some believe that this could be remedied by having all urban areas incorporated as cities. In reality, there are many obstacles for incorporation to become a reality, such as time considerations and economic and political constraints.

- **As opposed to the rest of the mostly affluent and Caucasian County, Marin City's population is ethnically diverse, and home to the largest concentration of African Americans in the County.** The community has an African-American population at least 20 times larger than the rest of the County. Moreover, approximately 17.9% of Marin City residents live below the federal poverty line and many of them reside in the only family-oriented public housing complex in the County.
- **With such a unique composition, Marin City has historically faced public misperception about its unique community issues and has been largely underrepresented in decisions made at the county level.** The number of people of color and Marin City residents in



County government appointed positions is extremely low and characterize a significant gap in representation.

- **Community assets, job opportunities, and affordable locations for small businesses were reduced or eliminated in the last 15 years because of the lack of effective community oversight over land development, usage, and ownership.** The expansion of Marin City's commercial area with the building of the Gateway Shopping Center, which displaced the locally renowned flea market, didn't concretely benefit Marin City, which had many black-owned businesses in the late 1950s. In the early 1980s, the site where the shopping center now is located was purchased and governed by the Marin City Community Development Corporation to stimulate local economic growth, development, and advance the community's self-reliance. Through a series of commercial transactions, what was supposed to be the cornerstone of the community's revitalization didn't fulfill its promise, leaving the community with diminished assets and a reduction in local quality jobs and entrepreneurship opportunities.
- **Gentrification must be mitigated.** The ethnic composition of Marin City has been changing as African-Americans are displaced by lack of home ownership opportunities and the high cost of rents.
- **The sustainability of the community is at risk.** The lack of representation of local constituents in public-decision making is one of the missing pillars on which the long term sustainability of the community should be based.

Policy Options

The participation of members from unincorporated areas in County's public decisions can be ensured and sustained **by the creation of the following representative bodies:**

- **Municipal Advisory Council (MAC)** (CA Gov't. Code § 31010) – This type of representative body would provide Marin City with direct participation in county-level decision-making affecting the community. The Board of Supervisors could resolve to establish an MAC and provide funds for its operation. The MAC would advise the board on matters related to the Marin City community, as designated by the board, concerning services that are or may be provided to the community by the county or other local governmental agencies including, but not limited to: advice on matters of public health, welfare, public works, and planning. During the last 40 years, many MACs were created in different counties in California, including Sonoma, Contra Costa, and Merced. Creating a MAC for Marin City presents many advantages, including:
 - Builds formal relationships and enhanced communication between County decision-makers and the Marin City community;
 - Helps the County save money in different ways, for example, by supporting the study of local needs at greater length and in more detail than county officials could afford;
 - May represent a preliminary step toward an eventual incorporation;



- Creates a viable avenue for local leadership to eventually become direct decision-makers around development issues impacting the community;
- Strengthen key partnerships as well as the community's collective capacity to move a broader sustainability agenda forward;
- Operational costs could be shared with the MCCSD;
- As a neighborhood-based government body, it provides an inclusive rather than exclusive forum for community participation.

The main disadvantage of a MAC as representative body for Marin City is its solely advisory role.

- **Area Planning Commission (APC)** (CA Gov't. Code 65101 (a)) – APC purposes differ in each community. Some APCs are formed to provide control over development, others for control over direction of community planning, etc. However, all APCs are created to get the input of a local community in larger city or county affairs. APCs have been established all over California, from Orinda to Riverside to the current Kentfield Planning Advisory Board.

APCs can be granted either the same powers as the County Planning entity or only some, depending on what the Board of Supervisors determines would be optimal for the area and the county. The APC could be responsible, for example, for creating a community plan to help better align the planning goals of the county with the planning goals of the Marin City community, as well as reviewing zoning, building design and permit applications in the area and identifying current code violations and correcting them. County Supervisors may assign any or all of the following tasks to the APC, but are not required to. The law allows the Board of Supervisors to decide what tasks will be designated to the APC.

- Assist in writing the general plan or specific plans and hold public hearings on such plans.
- Hold hearings and act upon proposed changes to the zoning ordinance and zoning maps.
- Hold hearings and act on tentative subdivision maps.
- Annually review the jurisdiction's capital improvement program and the public works projects of other local agencies for consistency with the general plan.
- Promote public interest in the general plan.
- Consult with and advise public officials and agencies, utilities, organizations and citizens regarding implementation of the general plan.
- Coordinate local plans and programs with those of other public agencies.
- Report to the legislative body on conformity of proposed public land acquisition or disposal with the adopted general plan.
- Undertake special planning studies.

MACs and APCs vary widely in structure, function, and performance according to each community and county government structure.



Policy Recommendation

With rising government budget deficits, along with the need for more local community control over decisions affecting Marin City's development, ensuring a formal representation of Marin City at the county-level is necessary to ensure this area's sustainability and self-reliance. Although the last District 3 County Supervisors have been sympathetic to Marin City issues, the time has come for systemic change through the establishment of formal local representation at the county level. The creation of a Municipal Advisory Council will strengthen Marin City's participation in county-level decisions and should be followed by the establishment of an Area Planning Commission, which could be an effective representative body with control over development decisions affecting the community. While this policy change would require a small investment in the short term, partnership with the Marin City Community Services District would reduce operation costs and the return of the investment could save Marin County great resources in the long term. Other unincorporated areas of the County, such as Tam Valley, already have design review boards, other advisory councils or similar bodies, and the time has come for Marin City to also be represented. The establishment of a Marin City MAC and APC would advance equity in representation and the community's sustainability, which is the fundamental principle and goal of the County's General Plan.

Sources

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