

What's a LAFCO and Why We Should Care

By Keene Simonds

What is LAFCO?

This is certainly a common response people have when they hear or read the name Local Agency Formation Commission of Napa County, which is better known simply as LAFCO. For many citizens, LAFCO is the mysterious government agency occasionally referenced in newspaper articles involving local growth and development issues. These articles, however, often provide incomplete descriptions of LAFCO's responsibilities and frequently raise new questions left unanswered, such as what is a sphere of influence?

With this context in mind, and in the spirit of the civic engagement underlying the Napa County Transportation and Planning Agency's recent "Growth Summit," the following summary seeks to answer the question of what LAFCO is.

LAFCOs were created by the California Legislature in 1963 with regulatory and planning responsibilities to coordinate the timely development of local governmental agencies and their services while protecting agricultural and open-space resources. Most notably, this includes managing boundary lines by approving or disapproving proposals involving the formation, expansion or dissolution of cities and special districts.

LAFCOs also conduct studies to help inform its regulatory duties. This includes preparing municipal service reviews to evaluate the level and range of governmental services provided in the region. LAFCOs prepare municipal services reviews in anticipation of establishing and updating each city and special district's sphere of influence. Markedly, a sphere of influence designates the territory LAFCO believes represents the affected agency's appropriate future service area and must be reviewed every five years. All boundary changes, such as annexations, must be consistent with the affected agencies' spheres of influence. Put another way, spheres of influence are the state's version of urban limit lines for each city and special district that direct growth and development in each county.

The composition of LAFCOs varies from county to county. LAFCO of Napa County is composed of two members from the board of supervisors, two members from city councils, and one member of the general public. Additionally, for each category represented on LAFCO, there is an alternate member. LAFCO contracts with Napa County for staff support services, but appoints its own executive officer. Half of LAFCO's operating costs are funded by the county with the remainder apportioned between the 5/18/2009

<http://www.napavalleyregister.com/articles/2008/07/20/opinion/commentary/doc4882ce66...>
cities based on a locally adopted formula.

LAFCO is the byproduct of a unique compromise made in the early 1960s to entrust locally elected and appointed officials with administering state policies relating to growth and development. LAFCO meetings are made in full public view and citizens are encouraged to attend and offer their perspectives on public hearing items before the commission. LAFCO

meetings provide an excellent opportunity for citizens to familiarize themselves with the growth, development and inter-jurisdictional issues facing Napa County.

LAFCO meetings are generally held on the first Monday of each month at 4 p.m. in the County Administration Building's Board Chambers. For more information, please visit LAFCO's Web site at www.napa.lafco.ca.gov

(Simonds is executive officer of LAFCO of Napa County.)