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County's sprucing up its services

By Judy Lin -- Bee Staff Writer

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Cranes constructing high-rises adorn Sacramento's skyline. Shoppers spend weekends packing big-box retailers in Elk Grove. And Intel just announced it will add a \$100 million complex in Folsom.

With all the activity buzzing inside the county's cities, it's no surprise that many residents outside the cities are feeling left behind.

"Sometimes I think it's still the Wild West out here in the county," said Richard Entelman, a 10-year resident of Rio Linda.

For many of the 550,000 - or 41 percent of the county's 1.3 million residents - living in unincorporated communities, the aging landscape reflects little change. To some, the "uncity" may even be slipping with each new illegal dump pile, unchecked speeding driver, and aging business corridor.

"Major new cities are being incorporated because they don't like the way the county is paying attention to them," said Otis White, president of Atlanta-based Civic Strategies, an urban policy consulting firm. Within the past decade, three areas have gone the way of self-determination and established the cities of Citrus Heights, Elk Grove and Rancho Cordova. They joined the cities of Sacramento, Folsom, Isleton and Galt.

County leaders say things aren't so bad and point to a countywide effort to improve the outlook. Officials adamantly deny making the changes as a knee-jerk reaction to calls for incorporation, but they admit to making a concerted effort to transform the county's bureaucracy of 14,000 employees.

Departments have been instructed to collaborate on projects, neighborhood signs have gone up to foster community identity, and the county is decentralizing its

offices to make access easier.

In an effort to make the county competitive, County Executive Terry Schutten has made revenue growth a priority - whether it's sharing sales tax revenue with cities or promoting economic development in unincorporated areas.

"The county has a bright future. I think we are at the center of growth of the Central Valley," said Schutten. "The county is in the process of trying to increase its revenue and control or decrease expenses as we right-size ourselves in order to be efficient."

Between World War II and the 1970s, the nation saw a steady decline in local governments, school districts and special districts as the country moved toward consolidating bureaucracies, White said.

Then, the pendulum swung the other way as centralized bureaucracies were seen as distant and uncaring, prompting an interest in creating more local government than ever before.

Even large cities aren't immune to alienating constituents. The city of Los Angeles, with its 3.8 million residents, struggled with a secession movement in the San Fernando Valley, spurred largely by residents who felt alienated and dissatisfied with city services.

"Counties around the country have a terrible image problem," White said. "It's not that they're bad government, it's that they just don't have an image. Cities get datelines, addresses on letters. I'm in Atlanta. Everybody knows where that is, but nobody can name the county it's in."

In Sacramento County, a large portion of its residents live in unincorporated areas, requiring the county to provide all the services of a typical city, including public works, planning, police and economic development. In all, there are more than 20 communities, each with its own needs and desires.

Over time, the areas that the county developed as commercial or retail hubs have agitated for incorporation - and won.

Now residents in three unincorporated areas - Arden Arcade, Fair Oaks and Rio Linda-Elverta - are exploring cityhood, though it's unclear whether those communities can sustain themselves.

Last year, Arden Arcade concluded that the community would need the state to increase its share of vehicle licensing fees to make cityhood a viable option. Proponents of incorporation are waiting for the Legislature to take up that issue.

Even the county's leadership disagrees whether incorporation is good or bad for the county. Before Roberta MacGlashan was elected supervisor, she cut her teeth as mayor of Citrus Heights and has been generally supportive of the movement. Fellow Supervisor Illa Collin, on the other hand, opposed Citrus Heights' formation along with the three areas now being discussed.

One thing is clear: The county is striving to change.

The county reorganized in 2004, creating three agencies - municipal, countywide and internal - in hopes of better serving residents by getting those departments to cross bureaucratic boundaries and share their resources.

The Municipal Services Agency brought together all those departments that deal with the everyday task of maintaining and improving a resident's quality of life, from transportation and planning to code enforcement and waste management.

The county didn't stop there. It created the Department of Neighborhood Services to reach out to residents.

That department has established the first of four planned neighborhood service centers, and the Board of Supervisors has granted community planning councils authority over land use decisions.

The first neighborhood service center opened a year ago in North Highlands and staff say business is booming. According to a recent report, the center served more than 4,000 customers and collected nearly \$1 million in fees.

A second center is being planned for the Orangevale and Fair Oaks community. The county clerk-recorder's office hopes to get adequate space so staff can conduct civil service weddings.

"We're really excited about that because that might be opportunity for cake," said Victor Morrison-Vega, director of the Department of Neighborhood Services.

Entelman of Rio Linda said he was pleased by the staff when he went to the North Highlands service center to inquire about building a second house on his 2.75-acre lot.

"They basically answered a lot of questions that I've been getting misinformation on. I've gotten four different stories. It's just so nice to be able to come into the desk and talk to someone," Entelman said.

Still, a friendly staff wasn't enough to change his mind about cityhood, which holds

the allure of transforming Rio Linda into a more sophisticated community filled with better services and round-the-clock policing.

"County government is so spread out; it's huge," Entelman said. "The city takes care of itself whereas in the county, for example, if you had to call for an emergency, it would have to be a very serious situation for them to respond to quickly."

Right now the county relies on the California Highway Patrol to enforce traffic laws, not the Sheriff's Department.

Community activists applaud the county's outreach but some remain skeptical. Dick Barbar, chair of the Fair Oaks Community Planning Council, says bureaucratic barriers still exist, particularly in the transportation department.

"There still seems to be a disconnect in how they conduct themselves to get really good community input," Barbar said. "They're one of the most visible when it comes to providing better streets, less congestion, better signage, safer walkways and yet they're the department we see the least of interacting with communities."

For too long, activists say, the county has taken an "we know best" attitude that has alienated residents and it's unclear if the hurt feelings will mend.

"I am still looking to see if that culture is ever going to change," said Bill Davis, a member of the Arden Arcade Community Planning Council and a leader of the Arden Arcade Cityhood Study Team.

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