

What Is a Special District?

Dublin San Ramon Services District Is an Independent Special District Providing Water and Wastewater Services

Summary

Dublin San Ramon Services District (DSRSD) is an independent special district, a form of government unique to California. Special districts are separate local government formed by local residents to deliver public services to a particular area. Although DSRSD now focuses on water, recycled water, and wastewater services, it was authorized originally as a multifunction community services district and remains subject to laws governing community services districts.

Special Districts Provide a Range of Services

Special districts can provide a single service or a wide range of services such as water treatment and distribution, wastewater collection and treatment, trash collection, fire and police protection, electricity, parks, mosquito abatement, and the management of ports, airports and libraries. Some community service districts provide up to 32 different services.

Despite their differences, special districts share four characteristics: each is a government (not a corporation or non-profit organization), has a governing board, provides services and facilities, and has boundaries.

Cities and counties are *general purpose* governments that perform a broad array of services to protect the health, safety, and welfare of all their citizens. Special districts are *limited purpose* governments. They can provide only the services allowed by state law and supported by their residents. Special districts localize both the costs and benefits of public services.

Types of Special Districts

Independent or Dependent – About two thirds of the state’s special districts are *independent*, including DSRSD. A separate board of directors governs an independent special district and is accountable only to the constituents of that district. Most boards are elected (a few are appointed), and generally they are small, with five to seven members. DSRSD has an elected five-member board and a general manager. The governing board adopts broad policies that the general manager carries out. In contrast, *dependent* districts are governed by other existing legislative bodies, generally either a city council or a county board of supervisors.

Enterprise or Non-enterprise – *Enterprise* districts recover the cost of providing services by charging fees, such as through a water or sewer bill. (The DSRSD website, www.dsrdsd.com, has details regarding its rates and fees). DSRSD is an enterprise district, as are most water and wastewater districts. *Non-enterprise* districts provide services that don’t lend themselves to fees and often they rely overwhelmingly on property taxes for their operational expenses. Non-enterprise functions are seen as providing a widespread benefit to an entire community. Flood control, cemeteries, libraries, groundwater management, and fire protection are common non-enterprise functions.

Single or Multiple Functions – Most special districts perform only a single function while multifunction districts provide two or more services. DSRSD provides three functions: water, recycled water and wastewater services.

California's Community Services District Law

The [Community Services District Law](#), enacted in 1951, enabled residents living in unincorporated, generally rural areas of California to form local agencies to provide needed government services. These districts were allowed to cross city and county lines. DSRSD, for example, serves portions of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties and three cities (Dublin, parts of San Ramon, and Pleasanton).

DSRSD traces its beginning to April 1953 with the creation of the Parks Community Services District, later renamed Valley Community Services District and then Dublin San Ramon Services District. The District's original charter included water and wastewater services, garbage collection, fire protection, parks and recreation, and transportation (the latter was never realized). After the cities of Dublin and San Ramon were incorporated in 1982 and 1983 respectively, they assumed responsibility for garbage collection, fire protection, and parks and recreation. Today DSRSD provides water and recycled water services to Dublin and the Dougherty Valley area of San Ramon, wastewater collection and treatment to Dublin and south San Ramon, and wastewater treatment to Pleasanton (by contract with the city).

History of Special Districts

California's most abundant form of local government, special districts first arose to meet the needs of San Joaquin Valley farmers. Frustrated by an inconsistent water supply and unstable prices, farmers in Stanislaus County organized the Turlock Irrigation District under the Wright Act of 1887 to deliver irrigation water. The district financed its activities with water rates and bond sales. The Turlock Irrigation District made it possible for local farmers to intensify agriculture and diversify crops.

The periods of prosperity and population growth that followed both World Wars increased demands for all kinds of public services in California. Special districts became a popular way to meet these needs. Unlike complex municipal bureaucracies, special districts were flexible and provided desired services quickly and efficiently. Salt marsh mosquitoes around the San Francisco Bay and higher than average malaria cases in rural counties prompted legislators in 1915 to allow local officials to form mosquito abatement districts. The state's 372 fire protection districts trace their origins to a 1923 state law. In 1931, the Legislature authorized recreation districts. Hospital districts arose in 1945 because of a statewide shortage of hospital beds. Special districts providing fire protection, sanitation, and water further expanded in the decade after World War II, and the Legislature authorized multipurpose districts through the Community Services District Law in 1951. A major update to the law took effect in 2006 as a result of Senate Bill 135 (Kehoe).

Sources

Portions of this document are extracted from these public domain sources:

"What's So Special about Special Districts?" (4th edition, October 2010), California Senate Local Government Committee, accessed January 19, 2016: http://www.csga.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/WhatsSoSpecial_2010.pdf; available on California Special Districts Association website: <http://www.csga.net/special-districts>

"Community Needs, Community Services: A Legislative History of SB 135 (Kehoe) and the 'Community Services District Law,'" (March 2006), California Senate Local Government Committee, accessed January 19, 2016: <http://www.calafco.org/docs/CNCSReport.pdf>; available on California Local Agency Formation Commissions website: <http://www.calafco.org/index.php/aresourcesguidesd/2011-07-21-19-42-00>