

# Shasta LAFCO close to clearing huge backlog of studies

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**POSTED:** 5:38 PM, Dec 8, 2014

**UPDATED:** 5:05 PM, Dec 10, 2014

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SHASTA COUNTY, California - For one Shasta County agency 2014 was a year spent catching up to 2008.

Following an agreement stemming from a class-action lawsuit in 2013, the Shasta Local Area Formation Commission, or Shasta LAFCO, kicked things into overdrive this year in an effort to clear a huge backlog of required studies and reviews for local cities and special districts that should have been completed more than five years ago.

The agency so far has finished the work for 31 districts in the county, and with one meeting left this year with hopes to gain board approval to finalize updated sphere of influence studies and municipal service reviews for 10 more districts, including the city of Redding.

“We’ve had to go into two meetings a month for the past two months to get it all completed, but if it wasn’t for (LAFCO CEO) Jan Lopez we wouldn’t have even come close,” said Steve Morgan, chairman of the Shasta LAFCO board.

Lopez was appointed to head the agency in October 2013, the same month Redding attorney Jim Reed filed a lawsuit alleging the organization had failed to complete dozens of mandatory studies and reviews while still collecting dues from districts around the county. An agreement reached in January gave Shasta LAFCO roughly a year to produce the outstanding documents for 41 districts, a hefty task for reports that routinely take months to research and evaluate.

“These are really minimal reports, I’m sorry to say, but that’s what we had to do to make it happen,” Lopez said. “I’m recommending that once we’re caught up we start staggering them earlier and looking to do comprehensive ones where needed.”

A LAFCO consultant since 1984, Lopez was a vocal critic of the local agency’s work under the helm of former Executive Director Amy Mickelson. When Mickelson left the position in July 2013 after a series of performance reviews, Lopez stepped up with a 15-month plan to get the organization back on track.

Fall River Mills residents Terry and Barbara Briggs are happy to see the progress.

“Our community service district realized we didn’t have the necessary municipal service review or sphere of influence study we needed when applying for grants in 2008, so we approached LAFCO to try and get it done — and that’s where we hit a big roadblock,” said Barbara Briggs, a former board member of the Fall River Valley Community Services District.

That district also sued Shasta LAFCO in 2013 seeking repayment of more than \$40,000 collected for services it said was never provided, but later reached an agreement that saw those studies completed this year.

Lopez said she’s eager to wrap up the remaining studies and look to the future, including deciding the fate of 10 seemingly defunct special districts discovered during research this year.

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# Shasta LAFCO falls short on class action lawsuit, but not for lack of effort

**BY:** Clay Duda

**POSTED:** 5:57 PM, Dec 18, 2014

**UPDATED:** 3:54 PM, Dec 23, 2014

**TAG:** [local news \(/topic/local+news/\)](/topic/local+news/) | [homepage showcase \(/topic/homepage+showcase/\)](/topic/homepage+showcase/) | [tablet showcase \(/topic/tablet+showcase/\)](/topic/tablet+showcase/)

REDDING, California - A Shasta County agency tasked with clearing a huge glut of overdue studies by year's end fell short of finalizing 10 outstanding reports during its last meeting of 2014 on Thursday.

The Shasta Local Area Formation Commission, or Shasta LAFCO, wrapped up all but two of 50 mandatory studies for cities and special districts that needed to be completed under terms of a class-action lawsuit.

The commission doubled up on meetings in recent months to get through the backlog of sphere of influence updates and municipal service reviews that should have been completed more than five years ago in 2008.

Terry Briggs, a Fall River Mills resident who brought the lawsuit against LAFCO, thanked the agency for its dedicated work this year during Thursday's meeting.

"The previous director didn't do in eight years what Mrs. (Jan) Lopez has done in eight months," Briggs told the commission. "We wouldn't be here today had the job gotten done seven or eight years ago."

While LAFCO failed to wrap up all of the necessary studies, attorney Jim Underwood said he was confident the agency would meet the terms of its settlement agreement.

“I think we are proceeding with the direction of the commission and working in good faith to get those done, so I think we’re in compliance with it,” he said during the meeting.

Eight studies and reviews were finalized Thursday during the more than four-hour marathon session, including an update to Redding’s sphere of influence that scaled back its reach.

The city reduced its sphere of influence, or area it could potentially annex in the future, from about 106 square miles to roughly 90 square miles, in part because geography and existing housing developments in unincorporated areas near city limits would hamper future expansion in some areas, said Kent Manuel, Redding’s planning manager.

“There was a realization that we couldn’t continue to grow to 106 square miles or continue to repair the roads (and other infrastructure) we have,” he said.

A decision on the Buckeye Fire Protection District northwest of Redding was continued until February amid unanswered questions of its boundaries and some past agreements with other agencies.

A bid to combine the McArthur and Northwest Lassen fire protection districts and establish a new sphere of influence was also continued to February as members of those fire departments and Shasta County Cal Fire took issue with some aspects of the proposed updates.

LAFCO commissioner Les Baugh said his concern centered on the impact the new sphere of influence could have on the nearby Fall River Mills Fire Protection District, which did not want to combine with the other departments.

“Fall River Mills (FPD) by our vote today could be bound, if I’m reading this correctly, to their existing area with no option to expand its area of existing service,” he said, noting the proposed sphere would surround Fall River Mills FPD on three sides.

Shasta County Fire Chief Mike Hebrard, who spoke against the proposal in November, said he still couldn’t support it Thursday even after some boundaries changes were made after the last meeting. “We submitted a new map with a smaller sphere of influence for LAFCO’s consideration,” he said.

Brent Cassity with the Northwest Lassen FPD said the district had been trying to combine with the McArthur firefighters for about five years now, but continued issues with Shasta LAFCO had prevented that from happening.

“We’re being annexed by McArthur, and for all intents and purposes we are already part of McArthur,” he said. Even still, Cassity said it would be best to do additional research and see what would work best for all of those involved.

The next Shasta LAFCO meeting will be held Jan. 8, 2015, in the Anderson City Council chambers at 1887 Howard St. in Anderson.

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