
Exploring Governance Alternatives in Unincorporated Areas: Case Studies and Insights

District Formation Advisory Services Initiative
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INTRODUCTION

The County of Sonoma (“County”) engaged RSG, Inc. (“RSG”) to provide District Formation Advisory Services for unincorporated communities. This countywide effort supports a clearer understanding of service needs in unincorporated areas, provides accessible information on governance and service delivery options, and facilitates community-driven dialogue about potential pathways forward.

As part of this initiative, the County published the *Governance Toolkit for Unincorporated Communities* (“Toolkit”) in April 2026. The toolkit serves as a foundational resource, offering an overview of available governance structures, service delivery and funding mechanisms, and key considerations for communities evaluating changes to how they deliver and govern services.

This document—*Exploring Governance Alternatives in Unincorporated Areas: Case Studies and Insights*—builds on that foundation by demonstrating how communities explore these concepts in real-world contexts across Sonoma County. It provides both a progress update on the communities engaged through this effort and a set of illustrative case studies that highlight local priorities, processes undertaken, and governance pathways considered. Together, these insights support continued learning and help communities navigate governance decisions at any stage of exploration.

INITIAL OUTREACH AND PRIORITY AREAS

Beginning in May 2025, County staff worked with Supervisorial District offices to identify contacts within Municipal Advisory Councils (MACs), Community Advisory Councils (CACs), and other unincorporated community groups previously engaged with the Unincorporated Governance Ad Hoc. Staff conducted outreach to assess interest and identify communities actively considering service or governance changes. As part of this effort, staff contacted the following communities and community advisory groups, representing all five Supervisorial districts:

- North Sonoma Valley MAC
- Sonoma Valley CAC
- Springs MAC
- Unincorporated East Santa Rosa
- Penngrove
- Moorland
- Dry Creek CAC
- Geyserville Alexander Valley MAC
- Mark West Area MAC
- Lower Russian River MAC
- Sonoma Coast MAC
- Graton
- Occidental

Following this initial outreach, a subset of communities and advisory groups expressed interest in participating in introductory meetings with RSG, including Dry Creek CAC, Graton,

Lower Russian River MAC, Moorland, North Sonoma Valley MAC, Occidental and Penngrove. Engagement levels varied across these areas, with some communities participating in initial discussions but not advancing further, and others not pursuing engagement. Three communities—Graton, North Sonoma Valley and Monte Rio (Lower Russian River)—ultimately advanced through the full engagement process and are reflected in the case studies that follow.

Appendix A summarizes engagement activities across communities.

This effort was structured as a time-limited initiative with defined scope and budget parameters. As a result, the project team focused on communities that demonstrated both interest and readiness to engage within the study timeframe. While engagement was limited in duration, the tools, frameworks and lessons developed through this process support a broader set of unincorporated communities as they continue to explore governance options.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT APPROACH

Community engagement has been central to this initiative. The process was designed to elevate local perspectives and align potential governance strategies with each community's priorities, needs, and capacity to engage.

Engagement typically began with discussions with local leaders to better understand service concerns, governance awareness, and community priorities. These early conversations surfaced key issues, clarified existing challenges and gauged interest in exploring potential governance or service delivery changes. Where communities showed interest and capacity to move forward, discussions evolved into more focused engagement, emphasizing technical considerations and potential governance pathways.

Recognizing that communities are at different stages, the approach applied a phased, responsive structure that balanced foundational education with tailored analysis. This flexibility supported engagement tailored to community needs and helped communities better understand available tools and next steps.

ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

The sections that follow present case studies that outline each community's priorities, engagement process, governance pathways explored, and key feasibility considerations. The document also highlights actions taken to date in priority areas and identifies potential next steps as each community moves forward.

Together, these case studies demonstrate how communities can apply governance tools and strategies in practice and serve as a resource for other communities and decision-makers exploring opportunities for service enhancements and improved governance alignment.

COMMUNITY CASE STUDIES

The following case studies illustrate how unincorporated communities across Sonoma County are exploring governance and service delivery options in response to locally identified public service needs and priorities. These case studies do not recommend a specific approach, but instead demonstrate how communities can apply governance tools and strategies in practice. They highlight how communities clarify service needs, engage stakeholders, and assess the feasibility of different governance and funding options.

NORTH SONOMA VALLEY (NSV)

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

Location: The North Sonoma Valley MAC (NSVMAC) serves the communities of Glen Ellen, Kenwood and Eldridge.

Governance Context: Municipal Advisory Council (MAC)

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

In North Sonoma Valley, discussions focused on planning proactively for anticipated growth, particularly related to development at the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC) site. Community representatives expressed interest in understanding how future growth may affect infrastructure, service delivery and overall community character.

At the same time, the community expressed broader interest in identifying governance and funding mechanisms that could support more locally responsive service delivery. As discussions evolved, participants recognized the need to clearly define and prioritize service needs before advancing a specific governance solution.

PROCESS UNDERTAKEN

Engagement with North Sonoma Valley began with exploratory discussions with local leaders to better understand community priorities, service concerns, and potential governance opportunities. RSG then facilitated an NSVMAC Board workshop that introduced governance options, the district formation process and the role of the Sonoma County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO).

A subsequent working session focused on key procedural elements of a LAFCO application and the factors that influence feasibility and review. Together, these efforts provided context to support informed, community-driven dialogue and offered practical guidance on governance, operational, and financial considerations as NSV evaluates its options.

GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS EXPLORED

Initial discussions in North Sonoma Valley considered forming a Community Services District (CSD) as a potential governance approach. Community representatives viewed this option as a way to provide more formal local representation and decision-making authority, establish dedicated funding for community priorities, and create a structured pathway to address ongoing service needs while maintaining community character. The community had previously considered forming a CSD, though Sonoma LAFCO did not recommend that approach at the time. Participants also expressed interest in exploring local funding mechanisms, including Enhanced Infrastructure Financing Districts (EIFDs) and Community Facilities Districts (CFDs), to support targeted improvements.

Building on these initial discussions, RSG worked with the community to explore a broader range of governance and service delivery pathways through a tailored educational workshop. The workshop examined options such as enhancing or leveraging the existing Municipal Advisory Council (MAC), utilizing funding districts such as EIFDs or CFDs, pursuing annexation to an existing district or city where applicable and forming a new special district.

RSG also provided targeted information on the LAFCO process, including key procedural steps, evaluation criteria and considerations for preparing an application should the community choose to pursue district formation.

OUTCOMES TO DATE

Through this process, NSV participants gained a clearer understanding of governance tools, funding mechanisms and the requirements associated with LAFCO processes. Discussions also shifted from focusing on a specific governance structure to a more deliberate, needs-based approach centered on identifying and prioritizing service gaps.

This shift established a more grounded framework for evaluating potential pathways forward, with a clearer understanding of tradeoffs, feasibility considerations and the level of community support needed to advance different options.

EVALUATING OPTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Discussions in North Sonoma Valley highlighted several key considerations that may help guide future decision-making:

- Engage the community to define and prioritize service needs, identify shared concerns, build alignment, and ensure the approach reflects clearly understood gaps.
- Clarify existing service roles and constraints to determine whether identified needs reflect limitations related to authority, funding or capacity.

- Align early with LAFCO requirements, including demonstrating service need, fiscal feasibility, and avoidance of duplication, particularly if pursuing options such as district formation or annexation.
- Assess the scale and geographic consistency of service needs across the community, including whether issues are concentrated in specific areas or shared broadly, as this may influence the feasibility of forming districts or implementing funding mechanisms.

GRATON

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

Location: The Graton Community Services District provides wastewater collection and treatment services to residents within the unincorporated community of Graton, situated in western Sonoma County.

Governance Context: Community Services District

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

In Graton, early discussions focused on a range of community priorities, including infrastructure-related needs such as garbage service, sidewalks and parking. The Town Square project also emerged as a top priority, with the community actively working to make improvements and finalize acquisition of the site. Participants noted that efforts to secure funding and advance projects rely heavily on board members and volunteers with limited time and resources, making capacity a key consideration for next steps.

As priorities became clearer, attention shifted to the Town Square and the District's ability to provide recreation services within its existing authority. The engagement examined what it would take to operationalize these services, including establishing ongoing funding, defining roles for programming and facility management, and identifying staffing or partnership models to support both day-to-day operations and long-term maintenance.

PROCESS UNDERTAKEN

Engagement with the Graton Community Services District (GCSD or District) began with initial conversations with Board leadership to better understand community priorities and concerns related to existing service gaps. These discussions clarified the District's current role, the status of ongoing initiatives, and the broader context shaping local service needs, including the development of the Town Square.

RSG then facilitated a targeted Board workshop focused on the District's interest in expanding from its core wastewater service function to include recreation services associated with the Town Square. The workshop provided an overview of GCSD's existing service authority under Community Service District Law and prior approvals from the Sonoma County Local Agency

Formation Commission (LAFCO), along with key considerations for moving forward. These included aligning potential service expansion with community priorities, assessing available capacity and understanding the practical requirements of implementing and sustaining new services.

GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS EXPLORED

Early conversations with GCSD highlighted opportunities to enhance service delivery in support of local commerce and community activity, particularly through the Town Square. The Town Square serves as a central gathering space for events, vendors, and tourism, and emerged as a key area where expanded services could add value.

Conversations centered on GCSD's potential to take on a greater role in the oversight, operation, and maintenance of the Town Square. In this context, RSG provided information on the District's existing authority under Community Service District Law, including its ability to provide recreation services.

Building on this, the workshop examined how to activate these recreational service provisions in practice. This included confirming the applicability of GCSD's existing authority, clarifying the anticipated scope of responsibility, defining an appropriate service model and identifying a sustainable funding approach.

Discussions emphasized that while GCSD has the authority to provide recreation services, successful implementation will depend on aligning service ambitions with administrative capacity, available funding, and clearly defined roles and responsibilities.

OUTCOMES TO DATE

Through this process, GCSD participants gained a clearer understanding of how existing statutory authority and prior LAFCO approvals may support service expansion without requiring a change in governance structure.

Discussions evolved from a general interest in enhancing community services to a more defined focus on the Town Square as a specific, near-term opportunity to activate recreation services. In doing so, GCSD developed a better understanding of the operational, financial and administrative considerations associated with taking on new responsibilities, including the level of capacity and resources needed to implement and sustain services over time.

EVALUATING OPTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Discussions in Graton highlighted several key considerations that may help guide future decision-making:

- Confirm that the proposed Town Square activities fall within GCSD's LAFCO-authorized recreation powers and do not constitute a new or expanded service requiring additional approvals.

- Define GCSD’s role in the Town Square and determine how the District will lead or support maintenance, programming, event coordination, and oversight, while identifying opportunities for shared responsibilities.
- Establish a clear financial framework that separates wastewater and recreation functions, identifies sustainable funding sources (e.g., fees, event revenues or grants) and accounts for both initial and ongoing costs associated with operations and maintenance.
- Explore partnerships or contracted services to support day-to-day operations and specialized needs, such as facility management, event programming or maintenance, particularly given current capacity constraints.
- Develop supporting policies and procedures to guide implementation, including budgeting practices, roles and responsibilities and basic performance tracking to support accountability and long-term sustainability.

LOWER RUSSIAN RIVER – MONTE RIO

COMMUNITY SNAPSHOT

Location: The Monte Rio Recreation & Park District’s (MRRPD or District) boundary extends from Northwood through portions of the Bohemian Grove over to Mesa Grande.

Governance Context: Recreation and Park District (independent special district)

COMMUNITY PRIORITIES

In Monte Rio, discussions focused on the District’s desire to better align service levels with community needs while navigating fiscal and governance constraints. Board members expressed interest in expanding services and improving infrastructure, but noted that limited financial capacity—due to a small tax base and low property tax allocation—constrains the District’s ability to do so.

At the same time, Board members recognized that residents have not yet clearly defined service priorities and emphasized engaging the community to better understand desired service levels and identify priorities before pursuing governance or service expansion efforts.

PROCESS UNDERTAKEN

Engagement with the Monte Rio Recreation & Park District (MRRPD or District) began with exploratory discussions with Board leadership to better understand existing challenges, governance considerations, and potential pathways forward. These conversations also touched on prior discussions with LAFCO, including key requirements and considerations associated with annexation and service expansion.

RSG then delivered a tailored Board presentation that outlined governance and service delivery options, the role of LAFCO and key feasibility considerations. The discussion also introduced approaches to community engagement and highlighted the importance of aligning potential governance actions with clearly defined service needs and fiscal capacity.

Together, these efforts provided context on key considerations for the District as it evaluates potential pathways forward, including procedural, financial and community engagement factors associated with different governance options.

GOVERNANCE PATHWAYS EXPLORED

Discussions in Monte Rio focused on identifying governance and service delivery approaches that could support expanded service capacity. Options covered included annexation to expand district boundaries, with the goal of strengthening the tax base and improving the District's ability to fund and deliver services. Additional approaches included formation of a Community Services District (CSD) to expand service authority, the use of service agreements to address specific needs, and consolidation.

RSG provided information on how each option functions in practice, including the level of control retained by the District, the complexity of implementation and potential implications for service delivery. Discussions also examined what it would take to advance these pathways, including navigating the LAFCO process, demonstrating service need, assessing fiscal feasibility and identifying sustainable funding sources.

Overall, conversations emphasized that while governance tools such as annexation or district formation may offer opportunities to strengthen service capacity, each option involves tradeoffs related to process complexity, financial feasibility, and the level of community support required to move forward.

OUTCOMES TO DATE

Through this engagement, MRRPD Board members gained a clearer understanding of the opportunities and constraints associated with governance changes, including procedural and fiscal implications.

The process also reinforced the importance of grounding future decisions in community input. As a result, discussions shifted toward prioritizing outreach as a necessary precursor to pursuing formal governance changes, helping establish a more informed and community-driven foundation for evaluating next steps.

EVALUATING OPTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Discussions in Monte Rio highlighted several key considerations that may help guide future decision-making:

- Engage the community to define and prioritize service needs, ensuring future actions reflect shared priorities and provide a clear basis for evaluating governance or service changes.
- Assess fiscal feasibility early, including the limitations of the District's existing tax base and the level of funding required to support expanded services.
- Evaluate annexation and other governance tools in context, considering not only potential benefits to service capacity but also the complexity, timeline and uncertainty associated with the LAFCO process.
- Identify opportunities for incremental or interim solutions, such as service agreements or targeted improvements, that can address immediate needs while the community explores longer-term strategies.

COMMUNITY INSIGHTS

These case studies highlight a range of starting points, challenges, and pathways explored across unincorporated communities in Sonoma County. While each community is distinct, several consistent themes emerged through this work that align with the frameworks and considerations outlined in the Governance Toolkit.

STARTING POINT OF SERVICE NEEDS

A key distinction across communities was how discussions began. In Graton, conversations focused on a defined project, the Town Square, which provided a clear and immediate context for evaluating service roles, funding needs, and implementation considerations. This focus enabled discussions to move quickly from general interest to practical questions about authority, operations, and feasibility.

In contrast, communities that began with broader goals, such as improving service levels or exploring governance changes, often needed an initial phase of engagement to define and prioritize service needs. This included clarifying what services are currently provided, where gaps or limitations exist and whether those needs are shared across the community. As reflected in the Toolkit, this step establishes a critical foundation for evaluating options. Without a clearly defined service need, it becomes more difficult to assess feasibility, identify appropriate tools or build momentum toward implementation.

CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

Across all communities, administrative capacity emerged as a key factor shaping both the pace and scope of potential actions. Many districts rely heavily on board members and volunteers, which can limit the ability to pursue new initiatives, manage ongoing programs or navigate complex processes such as LAFCO applications. In practice, this meant that while there was interest in expanding services, discussions needed to account for what could realistically be supported over time.

The Toolkit emphasizes the importance of aligning service ambitions with available capacity. In these case studies, this often translated into exploring phased approaches, identifying opportunities for partnerships or contracted services, and narrowing the scope of potential actions to those that could be implemented and sustained with existing—or realistically attainable—resources.

FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS

Across communities, there was consistent recognition that expanding services or pursuing governance changes would require dedicated and sustainable funding. However, discussions focused less on identifying specific funding mechanisms and more on understanding the costs associated with different service and governance options.

This included recognizing that new or expanded services require both upfront and ongoing resources, and that different governance pathways—such as annexation or district formation—carry distinct fiscal implications. These conversations highlighted the importance of first understanding the scale and nature of service needs, as well as the associated costs, before evaluating potential funding tools.

This aligns with a key principle of the Toolkit: funding strategies are most effective when grounded in clearly defined service outcomes and a realistic assessment of costs. In these case studies, establishing that baseline understanding was a necessary step before more detailed exploration of funding mechanisms could occur.

COMMUNITY ALIGNMENT

Across all communities, there was a consistent recognition of the need for additional outreach to better understand community priorities and build alignment before advancing governance or funding strategies. In several cases, local leaders noted that while initial interest exists in exploring certain options, the community must provide broader input to confirm priorities, assess support, and ensure future actions reflect shared needs.

In Graton, for example, outreach during early phases of the Town Square effort helped establish initial direction, but participants also recognized the need for continued engagement as the project moves toward implementation and more specific operational and funding decisions.

In other communities, participants expressed interest in expanding services while also recognizing that priorities may vary across different parts of the community. This highlighted the importance of designing engagement efforts that capture a range of perspectives and ensure that identified priorities reflect community-wide needs rather than a single area or interest.

This reflects a key principle of the Toolkit: communities should treat alignment as an ongoing process, not a one-time step, and maintain it throughout planning, evaluation, and implementation. Initial engagement helps establish direction, while continued outreach allows communities to refine priorities, communicate tradeoffs and build sustained support over time.

LOOKING AHEAD

The case studies and insights in this document reflect a range of community contexts, priorities and levels of readiness. While approaches will vary across unincorporated areas, this effort highlights key considerations that may inform future work.

As communities continue to explore service needs and governance options, opportunities may arise for continued coordination, information-sharing and technical guidance. These efforts may include supporting early-stage discussions to clarify service needs, providing context on available governance and funding tools and helping communities navigate key considerations associated with different pathways, including those involving LAFCO.

The tools and frameworks developed through this initiative, including the Governance Toolkit and case studies, serve as ongoing resources for communities at different stages of exploration. This effort reinforces that no single pathway addresses service needs in unincorporated communities. Instead, communities shape progress by defining clear priorities, assessing capacity realistically and applying governance and funding tools thoughtfully. By grounding discussions in these principles, communities can better evaluate options and identify approaches that are both feasible and responsive to local needs over time.

APPENDIX A: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

Community	Engagement Summary	Status of Engagement
North Sonoma Valley MAC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting held October 29, 2025 ▪ Follow-up presentations conducted on January 20 and January 27, 2026 	Completed
Graton CSD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting held August 26, 2025 ▪ Targeted Board workshop conducted on January 20, 2026 	Completed
Lower Russian River (Monte Rio)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting with LRR MAC Ad Hoc group held July 7, 2025 ▪ Follow-up meeting with MRRPD representatives held October 22, 2025 ▪ MRRPD Board presentation conducted on April 13, 2026 	Completed
Penngrove	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting held August 26, 2025 ▪ Follow-up meeting held October 24, 2025 ▪ Engagement did not progress beyond initial outreach 	Partial
Dry Creek CAC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting held February 19, 2026 ▪ Engagement did not progress beyond initial outreach 	Partial
Moorland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Initial meeting with Neighborhood Action Group representatives held July 23, 2025 ▪ Engagement did not progress beyond initial outreach 	Partial
Occidental	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outreach attempts made via phone and email in 2025–2026; No contact made 	Limited / No Response