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RICHGROVE - WHERE WATER FLOWS PROBLEMS GROW

BACKGROUND:

Richgrove is a small farming community in the southern part of Tulare County. In 2010, the United States Census Bureau reported the population to be 2,882. Richgrove Community Services District (RCSD) was founded in 1977, and supplies the domestic water, sanitary sewage and other services to homes and businesses. Currently, Richgrove has two functioning domestic water wells. Staffing of RCSD includes an Office Manager, Office Clerk (part-time) and two Service Employees. The RCSD Board consists of five elected members.

Special Districts in the State of California first began as a means to meet water needs of farmers in the San Joaquin Valley. Hampered by an inconsistent water supply, plus largely varying prices, farmers in Stanislaus County organized the Turlock Irrigation District under the Wright Act of 1887. The Wright Act allowed the majority of residents in an area to form a public entity for water delivery and to finance its operation through the sale of bonds. The Turlock Irrigation District originated California's Special District concept and made it possible for San Joaquin Valley farmers and others, such as Tulare County's RCSD, to intensify and diversify their domestic and agricultural activities.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION:

The Tulare County Grand Jury received an anonymous complaint alleging harassment of staff at the RCSD. During the investigative process, additional issues were identified.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION:

- Attended board meetings
- Interviewed witnesses
- Reviewed documentation

FACTS:

1. The water quality for the community of Richgrove was not routinely tested during the 2012 – 2015 time periods as mandated by the State of California and County of Tulare.
2. Richgrove has five wells of which two are operational.
3. RCSD applied for grant/loan funding to improve its water infrastructure, but was ineligible due to inconsistent water samplings.

4. Water use violations cannot be documented or enforced due to lack of meters and malfunctioning meters.
5. California Government Code 53235 requires all elected and appointed officials to receive two hours of ethics training within one year of taking office and every two years thereafter.

FINDINGS:

- F1. The complaint concerning staff harassment could not be substantiated.
- F2. A significant number of homes have no functioning water meters.
- F3. Contractors are being paid without written agreements on file.
- F4. The need for future ethics training for board members was discussed during an open meeting.
- F5. Due to broken or lack of water meters, some customers are not being billed properly.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- R1. RCSD ensure routine water testing is completed as mandated.
- R2. Water meters be repaired or installed.
- R3. Enforce all water usage violations.
- R4. The RCSD Board members should receive documented ethics training.

REQUIRED RESPONSES:

1. Richgrove Community Service District Board (F1-5 and R1-4)

Disclaimer

Grand Jury reports are based on documentary evidence and the testimony of sworn or admonished witnesses, not on conjecture or opinion. However, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing such evidence except upon specific approval of the Presiding Judge of the Superior Court, or another judge appointed by the Presiding Judge (Penal Code Section 911, 924.1 (a) and 929). Similarly, the Grand Jury is precluded by law from disclosing the identity of witnesses except upon an order of the court for narrowly defined purposes (Penal Code Section 924.2 and 929).

THE TULARE COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE MOVES INTO THE 21ST CENTURY

BACKGROUND:

The Tulare County Sheriff's Office (TCSO) was established in 1852 and has had 30 sheriffs in the last 165 years. There was a high turnover of sheriffs in the 19th century due to none of them being professional lawmen. They were farmers, contractors, printers, businessmen and others with established positions in the community to which they returned after serving one, or at the most, two two-year terms. The duties of the sheriffs of the 19th century were entirely different from those of today. Until 1892, they served as county tax collector as well as sheriff, presumably because neither position was considered a full-time job.

Today the department consists of full-time professional law enforcement officers. With more than 25 years with the TCSO, the current sheriff was appointed as acting sheriff in 2013. He was elected in June, 2014, and was sworn in on January 2, 2015. Per the Sheriff's Office website, "The mission of the TCSO is to improve the quality of life through professional services and community partnerships." Under the sheriff's guidance, the department has become more progressive, transparent and community oriented. Many improvements have been made in equipment, training and technology; with many more to come.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION:

The Tulare County Grand Jury initiated an investigation to update the residents in the county about the new technology and programs initiated by the TCSO.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION:

- Visited sites
- Interviewed staff
- Reviewed documentation

FACTS:

1. There are two cold case detectives currently on staff.
2. There are three cyber-crimes staff members.
3. The building of a new evidence storage facility has been approved for construction.