Council of Governments Convening

Minutes
Special Meeting
April 18, 2026 01:00 PM
20488 CA-116, Monte Rio
https://sonomacounty.ca.gov/lrrmac

1. **Call to Order**
   The meeting was called to order at 1:00 pm by Chair & Hacienda Representative: Vicki Clewes.

   Supervisor Hopkins facilitated this special meeting.

   A. Roll Call

      Present: Chair & Hacienda Representative: Vicki Clewes, Vice Chair and Monte Rio / Villa Grande Representative: Patty Thayer, Guerneville South / Pocket Canyon Representative: Betsy Van Dyke, Forestville Representative: Cari Hernandez, Rio Nido Representative: Nick Thayer, Guerneville Alternate Yvonne Green, Cazadero / Duncans Mills Alternate Terry Gwiazdowski

      Absent: Cazadero / Duncan Mills Representative: Tony Goodwin, Guerneville Representative: Joe Rogoff, Guerneville Representative: Spencer R. Scott, Forestville Representative: Lonnie Lazar

      Staff Present: Debbie Ramirez, Field Representative D5; Che Casul, Director of Community Initiatives D5; Tracy Lyons, Chief of Staff, D5; Ruby Seidner, Intern, D5; Jeff Duvall, Director Department of Emergency Management; Todd Hunsdorfer, Analyst CEO's Office; Hannah Whitman, Analyst CEO's office; Andrea Rodriguez & Kent Gylfe, Sonoma Water

   B. Participating Special District Governance Members:Paul Barry, Cazadero Community Services DistrictChris Tachouet, Gold Ridge Fire DistrictDavid Warburg, Gold Ridge Fire DistrictCharlie Lachman, Gold Ridge Fire DistrictJennifer Butler, Graton Community Services DistrictJoseph McIntyre, Graton Community Services DistrictJean Sasso, Monte Rio Recreation and Park DistrictMarsee Henon, Russian River Recreation and Park DistrictHerman J. Hernandez, Russian River Recreation and Park DistrictMegan Perkins, Russian River Recreation and Park DistrictCarl Nicolari, Russian River Recreation and Park DistrictGaylord Schaap, Sweetwater Springs Water DistrictTim Lipinski, Sweetwater Springs Water DistrictMarc Barraza Tran, Sweetwater Springs Water DistrictSukey Robb-Wilder, Sweetwater Springs Water District

      Jennifer Butler, Joseph McIntyre, and Jean Sasso are listed above, however did not attend. Additional attendees included David Gatlin, Monte Rio Recreation and Park District and Jason Weaver, Sonoma County Fire District.

2. **Council of Governments Convening**

   A. Welcome and Opening Remarks - Supervisor Hopkins

Supervisor Hopkins opened the meeting by welcoming attendees and framing the purpose of the convening. She emphasized that the session was designed as a high-level, relationship-building opportunity for districts to become familiar with one another before emergencies occur, ensuring everyone has contacts, point people, and a shared understanding of roles. She highlighted that the gathering also served as a chance to surface major challenges facing each district, explore opportunities for collaboration, and identify where the County or peer districts can help support solutions. Hopkins noted the importance of communication, coordination, and knowing "who to call" during crises, and encouraged participants to openly share concerns, opportunities, and successes during the round-robin introduction period.

B. Round of Introductions & Opportunity to Share Top District Concerns (2 min ea)

Cross-cutting Themes Raised

Funding strain across districts: Multiple speakers cited tight budgets, high operating costs, and the need for external funding and grant-writing support to sustain core services and overdue upgrades.

Permitting delays and complexity: Several districts described protracted, multi-agency permitting (including Permit Sonoma references) as a major barrier to timely infrastructure repairs and facility projects.

Communications infrastructure gaps: Consistent cell coverage, broadband reliability, and layered emergency communications (e.g., GMRS, landline resiliency) were flagged as essential needs—both for operations and community safety.

Staffing capacity & reliance on volunteers: Districts with small teams emphasized difficulty delivering services with minimal staff, interest in volunteer programs, and opportunities to share administrative resources.

County coordination & ombudsman support: Participants welcomed help navigating permitting and complex projects, with appreciation for County staff liaison support to keep public-benefit projects moving.

District-Specific Highlights

<u>Sweetwater Springs Water District</u>

Cell coverage & meter modernization: Representatives noted that automating ~3,700 service meters over the next 18 months depends on consistent cellular service; stronger tower coverage and broadband are needed to reduce manual reads and enable customer usage monitoring.

Grant capacity & coordination: Top requests included help to find, plan, and write grants, plus improved informal coordination with County staff to avoid duplicative street work and to bundle small projects into larger efforts for efficiency.

System investment & ratepayer trust: Board members stressed funding to maintain/upgrade the potable water system, vigilance about Russian River supply reliability, and ratepayer trust—operating efficiently without undue burden on customers.

Budget constraints & volunteer models: Districts emphasized doing "more with less," looking to volunteer programs and peer networking to stretch resources.

<u>Russian River Recreation & Park District</u>

Infrastructure & permitting: Long-time board member highlighted infrastructure repair needs (e.g., Vacation Beach Dam) and permitting delays across agencies; limited staff slows progress, and project funding is not currently in the budget.

Budget pressure & staffing: The district faces funding shortfalls, ongoing redevelopment repayments, rising labor/material costs, and a two-person staff (plus part-time bookkeeper). They're exploring volunteer engagement.

Monte Rio Recreation & Park District

Near-term priorities: Focused on opening the beach safely for summer and maintaining/repairing aging facilities.

Gold Ridge Fire District

Consolidation outcomes & facilities: Leaders described benefits from fire district consolidation, including markedly improved response times (from ~12 minutes pre-consolidation to ~5 minutes after).

New station project & permits: A state-of-the-art station in Guerneville is advancing; geotechnical results were favorable, land negotiations are underway, and teams seek support to expedite permitting and address known fill conditions.

Shared services: Ongoing coordination and standardization with neighboring fire agencies was praised for strengthening coverage and efficiency.

C. Communications Infrastructure & Cell Coverage

Che Casul reported that West County continues to face major communications challenges due to difficult terrain, frequent outages, and gaps in both cell and landline reliability. The County is working with partners to expand infrastructure, including new tower siting on public land, adding GMRS repeaters to sheriff-owned towers, and advancing a $17 million fiber-backbone project to support future broadband and public Wi-Fi. He emphasized the need for a layered, redundant system combining cellular, landline, satellite, GMRS, and fiber. Che noted that the County has no regulatory authority over utilities, and urged continued state and federal advocacy to improve coverage.

D. West County Water Quality and Recycled Water Supply Feasibility Study -
Kent Gylfe, Director of Engineering, Sonoma Water
https://www.sonomawater.org/westcountystudy

Kent Gylfe provided an overview of the ongoing West County Water Quality and Recycled Water Supply Study, a high-level regional analysis examining long-term wastewater solutions for small West County systems. He explained that the study evaluates potential regionalization options, including connecting existing wastewater districts, improving treatment capacity, and assessing opportunities for recycled water use.

The work also reviews the feasibility of serving unsewered communities and considers climate-related vulnerabilities such as flooding and drought. Preliminary findings show that local treatment options tend to be more cost-effective than export-to-Santa Rosa or Windsor solutions, though all options are expensive and would require substantial external funding. A project advancement phase is now underway, focusing on next-step priorities, governance considerations, and funding pathways. Public stakeholder meetings are ongoing and open to attendees.

E. RSG Consultant Update and Introduction of Governance Toolkit for Unincorporated Communities - Sara Court

Sara Court provided an update on the County's District Formation Advisory Services project, which supports unincorporated communities in evaluating options for improving local service delivery. She explained that the work focuses on helping communities identify service needs, understand governance

and district-formation tools, and evaluate operational and financial considerations for expanding or modifying services.

RSG conducted targeted engagement with priority areas—including Graton, North Sonoma Valley, and the Lower Russian River—using workshops and technical sessions tailored to each community's goals and readiness. The project will produce two key deliverables: a Governance Toolkit outlining available governance pathways, and case studies summarizing lessons from participating communities. Both resources will be available countywide to support future local discussions.

F. Fire District Consolidation: Overview and Lessons Learned - Shepley Schroth-Cary, Chief, Gold Ridge Fire District

Chief Shepley Schroth-Cary provided an overview of lessons learned from recent fire district consolidations in West County. He highlighted that consolidation efforts have significantly improved service levels, most notably reducing average response times from approximately 12 minutes to about 5 minutes following regional consolidation initiatives. He emphasized that merging districts has strengthened operational capacity, expanded shared resources, standardized equipment, and improved coordination among neighboring agencies. Chief Schroth-Cary noted that while consolidation requires substantial planning, consistent communication, and navigation of governance issues, the outcomes have delivered clear public-safety benefits and more sustainable long-term service models.

G. Public Comment Period for items related to this agenda

Public commenters expressed broad support for continuing Council of Governments–style convenings and suggested holding them twice per year. Several district board members and attendees emphasized the benefits of cross-district communication, shared learning, and coordination among general managers and operational staff. Suggestions included creating opportunities for joint meetings, facility tours, and exploring shared administrative resources, grant writing, and volunteer programs.

One member of the public raised concerns about communications during the recent sewage spill, noting that initial information online lacked detail. The individual expressed appreciation that improved information and transparency were later provided, and emphasized how critical timely communication is for river communities, especially during emergencies and power outages. He voiced gratitude for the collaborative work happening between districts and the County and urged continued improvement in public communication systems.

H. Closing Remarks - Supervisor Hopkins

Supervisor Hopkins thanked all district representatives, partners, and attendees for their engagement throughout the convening and noted strong interest in continuing these multi-district meetings. She invited participants to propose future agenda topics and emphasized the County's commitment to supporting collaboration across districts. She also highlighted opportunities for districts to benefit from County resources, including the availability of County surplus vehicles for special district purchase, with District 5 staff available to assist in coordinating access. She reaffirmed that her office is available to help facilitate inter-district coordination, support administrators in convening, and continue strengthening communication and partnerships across West County.

3. **Adjournment**

The meeting was adjourned at 4 PM.