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Shakeup in the valley

County officials are meeting to decide how much money and services to direct to the California Valley

BY COLIN RIGLEY

If you live in California Valley, the promises sound lovely: more firefighters at the ready, increased patrols from the Sheriff's Department, and more people to keep your neighbor's hovel up to code. Those were the promises, at least.

SPEED TRAP

The California Valley has long been a seldom-patrolled area, but with the influx of construction workers brought in to build two major solar projects, the law enforcement presence there could increase dramatically.

FILE PHOTO BY STEVE E. MILLER

As construction ramps up at both SunPower's California Valley Solar Ranch and First Solar's Topaz Solar Farm, the 300 or so residents in the remote California Valley are already beginning to see their way of life change. This is the Wild West of San Luis Obispo County, though it's located in the most eastern and undeveloped portions. It's known as a place people go when they don't want to be around people, and a bizarre realm that most residents may never visit, let alone understand.

In such a place, even the smallest change could likely have an impact. So consider how two enormous solar projects will likely alter the California Valley and life for its residents, if not in the long-term, then certainly during the three or four years of construction.

"The people out here were kind of surprised that we had like six cops just sitting and waiting for something to happen," said John Wilson, who lives on the western edge of the valley. "I think the first two weeks, I think they nailed everybody in the valley."

The California Valley has a small motel, no grocery store, no gas station, and, historically, no assigned presence from the Sheriff's Department and only part-time medical and fire services provided by CAL FIRE. But those services are already increasing and could, perhaps, continue to rise.

CAL FIRE recently received county approval to add three additional personnel, bumping the area's fire and medical service to a 24-7 presence, according to County Administrative Officer Jim Grant. Money for the additional personnel has come from the county's General Fund, Grant said. It won't be possible for the county, which has been scaling back its expenses due to the economy, to keep up such staffing for too long, but county officials are counting on a variety of funding sources from SunPower and First Solar. Officials worked out agreements with both companies and conducted an economic analysis early in the process. In total, California Valley solar should generate $22 million to $26 million over the next three to four years, Grant said.

Part of that additional revenue is slated to go toward such services as fire, medical, and law enforcement to the tune of about $1 million per year. In the meantime, the county will continue to backfill its costs with General Fund dollars, but the hope is that solar tax revenues will eventually pan out as expected.

"We think within the next [fiscal] quarter or two, we're going to see that sales tax coming," Grant said.

But it's not as cut and dry as early studies may have suggested. Officials from a variety of county departments are still in talks as to how to spend the new money and how much of it will go toward services for California Valley residents.

"If we were having this conversation five years ago, it would have been fairly straightforward to add staff," said Matt Janssen, public information manager with the Planning and Building Department. "... But in today's economy, you just don't add staff without quite a bit of analysis before that."

According to Janssen, code enforcement cases in the California Valley have increased 10 to 20 percent in the past year. The reason for the increase remains unclear, but the early suspicion is it has something to do with the presence of more people, mostly construction workers building the new solar projects. There's no solid plan yet, but Code Enforcement could add an additional half-time or three-quarter-time employee to oversee California Valley.

The area has long been a tough place to live. Much of the valley's water is undrinkable without treatment. And being an area that's rarely trafficked by people with badges, some things can go unchecked.

"A lot of people that live out there are not interested in any laws or regulations," Sheriff's Department spokesman Rob Bryn told *New Times*.

Bryn said the department was working to decide whether to make California Valley a new beat area (there are seven such beats in the county) or to add a regular deputy post. The nearest sheriff's station is about 90 minutes from California Valley, which is designated as a "call for service area."

Sheriff's Department Cmdr. Ken Conway said, if all goes as planned, there will be a deputy on patrol in California Valley from about 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. for five to seven days per week, depending on how the funding comes together.

In addition to CAL FIRE, the California Highway Patrol beefed up its presence in the area to compensate for the influx of construction workers. According to residents, the increased police presence has caught some locals off guard, mostly drivers who aren't used to getting pulled over.

"We're glad they're out here because we never had police protection before and now we have it," said resident David Webb. "And they've actually driven a few rats out of the woodwork."

One CHP official told *New Times* that officers have, in the past, nabbed drivers in the area going at speeds as high as 100 miles per hour and more.

Wilson said the CHP presence increased noticeably when construction began. He's seen several trucks hauling gravel to the projects pulled over. Residents, too, have been stopped, but mostly people with "valley cars"—junkers that get from A to B but generally aren't registered or smogged—are the ones getting ticketed.

"It really doesn't affect me, but a lot of people out here, they were happy at first ... but then when they started getting ticketed for every little thing, they started grumbling about it," Wilson said.

Whatever the future holds for California Valley, the one certainty is that it's not going to be the same place.

"And with the construction, it just looks like a city's going up," Wilson said.

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