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County Williamson Act Survey Results
Executive Summary
March 1, 2010

Introduction

The California State Association of Counties (CSAC) was asked by the Senate Local Government Committee (Committee) to help obtain information on the Williamson Act for a special oversight hearing of the Committee. The hearing, *Williamson Act: The Past, Present & Future,* is scheduled to take place on March 3, 2010 from 9:30am - 11:00am in Sacramento.

Consequently, CSAC conducted a survey on county Williamson Act issues specifically related to the lack of subvention funding to counties. The survey was sent to all 58 counties on February 19, 2010. CSAC received 23 responses from the following counties: Alameda, Butte, Contra Costa, Fresno, Imperial, Kern, Kings, Lake, Lassen, Mariposa, Monterey, Napa, Placer, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Barbara, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sonoma, Tehama and Yolo. The brief survey contained basic questions related to how counties are dealing with the cuts to Williamson Act subventions. The following is a summary of responses received.

How is your county responding to the state's failure to restore Williamson Act subvention funding?

The majority of respondents to the survey indicated that they have continued to fund the program in the 2009-2010 budget year despite the lack of subvention funding. However, the majority of respondents also indicated that they are investigating options for the non-renewal process and other longer term strategies to deal with a lack of subvention funding.

Nine counties, including Fresno, Imperial, Kings, Lake, San Benito, San Joaquin, Shasta, Sonoma, and Yolo have indicated that they have stopped accepting any new Williamson Act applications. Furthermore, Imperial County Board of Supervisors voted recently to not accept any new contracts and to not renew existing contracts, making them the first to begin the non-renewal process as a direct result of the state budget cuts. Additionally, Lassen County is initiating an economic study to investigate the potential impact of terminating the entire program.

The consensus from respondents also suggested that counties continue to be in a "holding pattern" with respect to making any type of decisions on the future of the program. With the loss of subvention funding from just one budget year, the state has not clearly indicated if this is a short-term solution or if the program will not be funded for a significant period of time. One county clearly indicated that they will be considering cessation of the program if the State continues to not appropriate subvention funds.

Is your county exploring any options or alternatives to the Williamson Act Program, such as developing a local program?

The majority of respondents to the survey are not currently considering alternatives to the Williamson Act Program. Several counties remarked that they have explored alternative options, including a locally funded and administered program, but have found alternative options not attractive enough to divest from the Williamson Act Program despite the

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uncertainty surrounding subvention funding. As mentioned in the response to the previous question, counties remain in a holding pattern and are hesitant to dedicate scare resources towards investigating alternative options until the future of the Williamson Act Program becomes clearer.

If your county is continuing to fund the Williamson Act program, have you had to make cuts to other programs? How are you dealing with the loss of subvention funds?

Counties have indicated a variety of different ways in which they are handling the lack of subvention funding. Several counties are making cuts to other programs and services as a result of the need to backfill the program.

Tehama County detailed the loss of over $800,000 in subvention funding and how it directly affects their general fund revenues. As a result, Tehama County has made staff reductions and other program cuts to deal with the loss. San Benito County detailed how the loss of subvention funding combined with the deterioration of property tax revenues and slumping sales taxes has caused their County to eliminate positions, lay off employees and to tap into reserve funds. Kern County also described a loss of $4.6 million in subvention funding and its ripple effect on the County's ability to provide other services. Siskiyou County described how the lack of subvention funding has had a direct impact to their general fund as their budget reserves have been depleted.

The majority of respondents are making cuts in their respective budgets to absorb the cut to subvention funding. In addition, all respondents emphasized the importance of the program to their respective communities and the dramatic impact that continued cuts to the program would have on counties, agriculture and the environment.