

# 2017 SPECIAL DISTRICTS 101

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**California Special  
Districts Association**  
*Districts Stronger Together*

# 2017 SPECIAL DISTRICTS 101

- What is a “special district”?
- Who do special districts serve, and what types of districts exist?
- What makes special districts so “special”?
- Special Districts Leadership Foundation (SDLF)



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## What is a special district?



## What is a special district?

- A special district is:
  - Created by a community's residents;
  - Funded by a community's residents; and
  - Overseen by a community's residents

...for the purpose of providing a new or enhanced level of service and infrastructure to the community

- In other words, special districts are formed when it's something:
  - The community wants;
  - The community wants it done well; and
  - The community wants it done with local control

## Independent vs. Dependent

### Independent Special Districts

Independent special districts are sanctioned under California Law and created by local voters for the performance of specified core services. Local residents govern the operation of their districts through locally elected or appointed boards of directors.

(Defined in Government Code Section 56044)

### Dependent Special Districts

“...any special district that has a legislative body that consists, in whole or part, of ex officio members who are the officers of a county or another local agency or who are appointees of those officers, and who are not appointed to fixed terms.”

- Government Code Section 56032.5

## An Independent Special District is NOT:

- ❑ **NOT** a part of the state government
- ❑ **NOT** part of a city or county government
- ❑ **NOT** a school or college district
- ❑ **NOT** a joint powers authority (JPA)
- ❑ **NOT** a non-profit corporation
- ❑ **NOT** a county service area (CSA)
- ❑ **NOT** an assessment district or special assessment district
- ❑ **NOT** a community facilities district or “Mello-Roos” district
- ❑ **NOT** an improvement district
- ❑ **NOT** a permanent road division



Who do special districts serve,  
and what types exist?



## Who do special districts serve, and what types exist?

Today's special districts serve millions of Californians every day, just a few examples:

- Fire protection for more than 11 million people
- Water and wastewater systems for more than 30 million people, and 90 percent of California's farmland
- Operate more than half of California's critical access hospitals.



## Community's essential services

Districts protect health and safety:

- Fire Protection
- Healthcare
- Police Protection
- Mosquito Abatement and Vector Control
- Public Cemetery



## Community's essential services

Districts provide local infrastructure:

- Water, Irrigation, and Flood Control
- Sanitation, Wastewater, and Water Recycling
- Resource, Land, and Water Conservation
- Recreation and Parks
- Airports, Ports, and Harbors
- Libraries



## Statutory authority and enabling legislation

Principle Act:

- Generic statute which applies to all special districts of that type
  - Find CSDA's Laws Governing Special Districts at [www.csdanet.org](http://www.csdanet.org)
  
- 36 principal act statutes, for example:
  - Fire protection districts (Health & Safety Code §13800 et Seq.)
  - Community services districts (Government Code §61000 et Seq.)

## Statutory authority and enabling legislation

Special Act:

- Statute tailored to the highly unique needs of a specific area (often regional)
  
- Approximately 140 special act districts, for example:
  - Santa Clara Valley Water District
  - Olivehurst Public Utility District

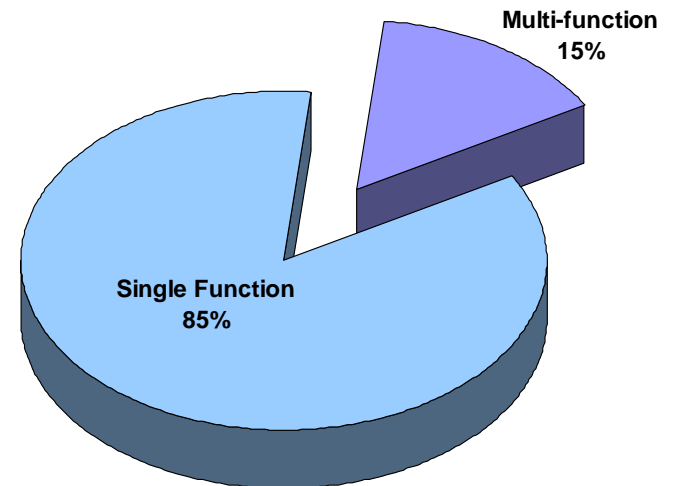
## Single Service vs. Multi-Service

Single service:

- Fire protection districts
- Port/harbor districts
- Public cemetery districts

Multi-service:

- Community services districts
- Municipal water districts
- Utility districts



## Enterprise Services vs. Non-Enterprise Services

Enterprise services:

- Primarily funded by fees for service(s)
  - Water rates
  - Sewer rates
  - Electricity rates

Non-enterprise services:

- Primarily funded by property taxes
  - Fire protection
  - Mosquito abatement
  - Parks

What makes special districts  
so “special”?



## What makes special districts so “special”?

- Focused “specialized” service
  - Perform a specific set of services
  - Innovation and prudent long-term planning
  - Deliver unmet service needs
  
- Voter driven
  - Formed only with the consent of the voters
  - Raise taxes only with the consent of the voters
  - Governed by board members that represent the voters
  
- Flexible and regional
  - Serve large regions or small neighborhoods
  - Boundaries based on need



## What makes special districts so “special”?

- Clear cost-benefit
  - Offer level of service that residents want at the price they can afford
  - Responsive to desire for specific, new, or enhanced services
  
- Open and transparent
  - Annual independent audit with the county auditor
  - Annual financial statement and compensation report with the State Controller
  - Regular municipal service reviews by LAFCO
  - Required Ethics training for compensated board members
  - Fair Political Practices Commission regulations
  - Public Records Act
  - Open meeting requirements in the Brown Act

## What makes special districts so “special”?

- Connecting:
  - Governance;
  - Revenue authority; and
  - Specialized service delivery

## History of special districts in California

- ❑ Started in the 1880's with irrigation districts
  - ❑ Turlock Irrigation District formed in 1887 following passage of the Wright Act
- ❑ Mosquito abatement districts first formed in 1915 in response to SF Bay salt marshes and spread of malaria
- ❑ Grew with population and demand for services in the 1950's and 1960's
- ❑ Declined by 5% in CA since its peak in 1997, while nationwide continued to grow by 10% in same period

# Special Districts Leadership Foundation (SDLF)



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## Special Districts Leadership Foundation (SDLF)

- Non-profit, 501(c)3 organization formed to promote good governance and best practices among California's special districts through certification, accreditation, and other recognition
- Signature programs:
  - District Transparency Certificate of Excellence
  - District of Distinction
  - Special District Administrator Certification
  - Recognition in Special District Governance
- Scholarships:
  - Dr. James Kohnen Scholarship
  - John Yeakley Special District
  - Educational Allowance Fund

Learn more at:

[www.DistrictsMakeTheDifference.org](http://www.DistrictsMakeTheDifference.org)



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