

Affluent Bell Canyon Launches Special District

Gated-Community Homeowners Get Benefits of Cityhood Without Burdens

By BOB POOL, Times Staff Writer

Suddenly blessed with municipal benefits without the burden of cityhood, homeowners in gated Bell Canyon in the West San Fernando Valley have launched a community-service district that will give them control over most of their neighborhood services.

District directors were sworn in Wednesday night and immediately vowed to improve fire protection and recreation facilities in the affluent 380-home community, which is tucked away at Ventura County's eastern edge and accessible only through the West San Fernando Valley's Canoga Park.

Under state law, the new district will also be legally authorized—but not obligated—to provide water and sewer services, fire and police protection, street lighting and road maintenance services.

Services that Bell Canyon leaders decide not to take over or beef up with special funding allocations will continue to be administered and paid for by Ventura County.

Bell Canyon directors said they expect their first project will be construction of a fire station that will qualify their community for a lower fire-insurance rating. The canyon is classified as a brush-fire zone and is dotted with rustic and Spanish-style houses valued at about \$500,000 each.

The new service district was overwhelmingly (342-7) approved by voters June 5 to cap a 10-year campaign by Bell Canyon leaders to deannex themselves from the Simi Valley-based Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District.

Because Bell Canyon's streets are privately owned and closed to

Bell Canyon is a private community and expenditures from an outside district could allow public access to our private roads.

Bud Toye



the general public, the park district had never developed parkland or initiated recreation programs there.

"We are a private community and any expenditures Rancho Simi would have made here would have opened this area to the public. We never found an appropriate way to spend the (recreation tax) money on private property," said Bud Toye, the 44-year-old owner of a Chatsworth electronics firm who was picked Wednesday as the district's first board president.

Under terms of last month's ballot measure, the service district's initial yearly income will be the approximately \$100,000 in taxes that Bell Canyon residents had until now paid to the Rancho Simi park district.

According to Rancho Simi manager Jerry Gladden, Bell Canyon was the park district's wealthiest community—providing about 15% of its tax revenue.

Toye said Bell Canyon home-

owners will also have the authority to assess themselves for special projects up to a \$200,000 limit.

Other projects besides the fire station that the district may tackle include construction of a proposed sewer pipe hookup to the City of Los Angeles' sanitation system. Such a connection and an agreement with the city to take Bell Canyon's wastes could save residents thousands of dollars in sewage-pumping costs to the Las Virgenes Municipal Water District's Tapia Sewage Treatment Plant, Toye said.

Ventura County, meantime, will continue to provide sheriff's and fire protection to Bell Canyon, including payment of a \$25,000 yearly fee to the Los Angeles City Fire Department to have city units provide "first-in" responses to canyon fires, said county Local Agency Formation Commission Executive Officer Robert Braitman.

The county already has a fire

station site set aside in Bell Canyon, but building and equipping a fire-house will cost about \$400,000, Braitman said.

Ventura County Supervisor James Dougherty of Simi Valley—who was present with Braitman for the swearing-in of the Bell Canyon board—said the county would assign firefighters to the station if the community builds one.

Dougherty said county officials generally oppose special districts such as Bell Canyon's since "they take away the tax dollar and sort of fragment our service policies.

"There has to be a good reason for us to approve one of these and here it's the isolation of Bell Canyon. The fact is, people here see themselves as Los Angeles County residents," Dougherty said.

Although Bell Canyon has some of the responsibilities of cityhood, Dougherty said he does not anticipate a future incorporation move since "they don't have the financial base here to support it. This is a medium measure that will allow them to have the city function without the cost."

Toye, who also characterized the new district as an "an alternative to cityhood," said his board hopes to work closely with the independent Bell Canyon Assn., which uses assessments of \$440 collected yearly from each canyon family to finance the gate's guard service and maintenance of 13 miles of private streets.

When development is complete in the 1,672-acre Bell Canyon area, it will have 796 homes.

Serving with Toye on the district's board are Otto Buss, Bob Connelly, Arch McGregor and Ron Spiller.