

# The Bakersfield Californian

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## **COMMUNITY VOICES: Call to action: Support for special districts**

By Les Clark, III  
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One year in, the pandemic continues to take a fiscal toll on local governments, impacting their ability to provide uncurtailed essential services to their communities. Across California, cities and counties have accessed the CARES Act's Coronavirus Relief Fund through the state; however, Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration did not consider special districts in its CRF allocations, despite their stature as political subdivisions of the state. As a result, county and city relief funds were the next option — nearly all of which were unable to provide.

When local special district leaders reached out to Kern County officials asking for assistance, they listened. The Board of Supervisors voted unanimously on Nov. 17, 2020, to provide \$2 million for the county's 85 special districts — many of which provide critical services such as water, irrigation, parks, mosquito abatement, health care and cemetery services to hundreds of thousands of Kern County residents. Of all 58 California counties, Kern is the only one to establish a dedicated program for special districts' pandemic relief using its CARES Act dollars and is one of only a handful that shared any form of financial relief with their communities' independent special district governments.

Because of the program, the West Side Recreation and Park District was able to utilize \$70,000 to soften the fiscal blow COVID-19 has had on the district. This amount was significant and help offset costs for facilities and staffing costs without the ability to generate revenue through programming and park rentals. Our district and many other special districts in Kern County have been hit hard by COVID-19, coupled with the downturn in the oil industry which generally represents about 60 percent of revenues in some cases. I also am the contract general manager of Buttonwillow and the aforementioned is a representation of them as well.

To date, \$1.4 million has been used to reimburse districts' expenditures in Kern County for pandemic response eligible under the program, such as personal protective equipment and sanitization costs, COVID-related payroll and unemployment expenditures and telecommuting infrastructure expenses. When others looked away, Kern County looked to partner.

Now, Kern County's special districts — and districts across the state — seek access to new federal funding for state and local governments appropriated under the American Rescue Plan Act. Here, at the West Side Recreation and Park District, ongoing revenue losses due to COVID-19 and related state orders remain a major concern for our fiscal bottom line. Without equitable, fair access to new relief dollars, our district will have to make cuts to programs and continue to do more with less. This includes staffing cuts and facilities shut down, including the Natatorium that is very popular for our community.

For the past year, Gov. Newsom has overlooked the pandemic's impacts on the state's special districts, which is expected to total \$2.43 billion by the end of 2021. We urge the governor to factor in the remaining needs of Kern County districts and those of other communities across the state yet to access

relief funding. Our needs are primarily rooted in revenue losses, which is now eligible to use under federal law.

We are proud of our local leaders and the solid actions they have taken to address this serious matter. With their continued partnership, and with overdue support from the state of California, Kern County's special districts can continue providing critical and essential services without disruption and employing our front-line workers. Together, we can continue making the difference in our communities.

*Les Clark, III, is district administrator of the West Side Recreation and Park District in Taft, contract general manager for Buttonwillow Recreation & Park District and president of the Kern County Special Districts Association.*

[https://www.bakersfield.com/opinion/community-voices-call-to-action-support-for-special-districts/article\\_cfa7084e-8cd1-11eb-86c1-af77a86a8841.html](https://www.bakersfield.com/opinion/community-voices-call-to-action-support-for-special-districts/article_cfa7084e-8cd1-11eb-86c1-af77a86a8841.html)