

THE FRESNO BEE

Special districts, largely left out of COVID-19 relief funds, need Legislature's help

March 28, 2021

By: Tom Collishaw

President Biden signed into law \$350 billion in state and local government COVID-19 funding relief as part of the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan Act. The problem is little — if any — of it is directed to the water districts, sanitation districts, fire protection districts, recreation and park districts, and other special districts that keep our rural communities running here in the San Joaquin Valley and throughout the state.



Nine-year-old Jose Hernandez draws tap water June 17, 2020, in his Earlimart home for dishwashing — one of the few purposes his family uses the city's well water for — because of lingering fears of contamination of the groundwater.

As a technical assistance provider to more than 100 small water and wastewater districts in the San Joaquin Valley, Self-Help Enterprises sees the need small districts have for federal relief resources to confront COVID-19 and overcome the pandemic's fiscal impacts. Many rural Californians are served by small water systems that lack the reserves needed to withstand the loss of revenue experienced over the past year.

Special districts carry out the essential work to manage our small communities' access to clean and safe drinking water. While districts become progressively more impoverished and under-resourced over time, we cannot afford to overlook their important role.

When Congress passed the CARES Act last year, it approved \$150 billion in state and local government aid, of which California received \$15.3 billion. Unfortunately, the act did not specify how to meet the needs of disadvantaged communities. Further, unlike our neighbors in Colorado and Oregon, California did not allocate sufficient funds to special districts as it did to other forms of local government. Moreover, according to a recent state auditor report, rural counties, where the majority of small special districts exist, received just half the resources of urban counties despite experiencing similar rates of COVID-19 and higher rates of unemployment and economic distress.

Under the American Rescue Plan, billions will flow to Sacramento and nothing to special districts. Unfortunately, special districts will face similar obstacles to relief funding as they did under the CARES Act. The question is whether the Newsom administration and Legislature will decide to distribute funding more equitably to our rural communities, particularly directly to special districts.

Fortunately, there is an alternative approach to COVID-19 relief funding: H.R. 535 (Garamendi) and the bipartisan S. 91 (Sinema), known as the Special Districts Provide Essential Services Act.

The act would set aside 5% of California's share of the coronavirus relief funding to go to special districts and the communities they serve. There is no doubt about the need. A recent State Water Resources Control Board survey found that water agencies alone are facing at least a \$1 billion revenue shortfall due to unpaid bills. And, that's just water; it doesn't include the impacts to our recreation and park districts seeking to provide safe outdoor programs and space for exercise, mental health, and community well-being. Nor does it include the health care, mosquito abatement, fire protection, and other safety, utility and emergency services districts.

We thank Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-California, and Rep. Jim Costa, D-Fresno, for serving as original co-sponsors of the Special Districts Provide Essential Services Act. But now we need Congress and the Biden administration to join in support of all of California's communities. At the same time, we call on Newsom to factor special districts into California's COVID-19 relief programming. Let's not repeat the mistakes of 2020.

Tom Collishaw is president and CEO of Self-Help Enterprises, whose mission is to work together with low-income families to build and sustain healthy homes and communities throughout the San Joaquin Valley. Since 1965, Self-Help Enterprises' efforts have touched the lives of over 55,500 families.