

Opinion

Need to clarify SC County fees

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IT IS CLEAR the county needs to do a better job advising homeowners and business operators of costs for improved services — before tax bills go out.

That became obvious a few weeks ago when the makings of a taxpayers' revolt surfaced after property tax bills for 1986-87 were mailed with a new "Police CSA No. 38" listed on them.

County Service Area 38 is for increased sheriff's patrols and related costs, and may cost residential property owners \$18-\$33, commercial property owners in rural areas between \$348 and - \$1,392, and those in urban areas between \$636 and \$2,457.

The taxpayers' protest is still brewing, and Tuesday the Board of Supervisors is expected to schedule a Nov. 25 discussion on possible fee inequities included within that new service area.

It's taken a huge effort at the County Center to get proposed amendments this far. There should be a way to avoid such a panic that has placed the county in a defensive position.

If a proposal to spell out the costs in a pre-budget advertisement sound self-serving, well, then, how about the county mailing notices of what a particular service will cost?

Even that sounds costly, but look what has happened this time around.

At last check, six persons had worked three weeks in the Assessor's Office to double-check whether proper appraisals of benefit were levied against individual parcels. Follow-up field inspections are anticipated, too.

If — or when — those amended levies are decided, then new tax bills will have to be sent out.

The importance of the Board making improvements on notifying property owners of new fees is increasingly evident as a proposed County Service Area 49 for "Library Services" comes under review Tuesday at 9:30 a.m. CSA 49 is the proposed funding mechanism, which would be part of the 1987-88 tax bill, to implement a long-range library plan, and it has to be on file with the California Board of Equalization by Dec. 31.

And, as we mentioned last week, formation of another county service area to support a parks program in the county is moving right along.

Santa Cruz County is unusual in that the majority of its residents live in the unincorporated area, most of them in the "urban" zones. Much of the population there is pressing the Board of Supervisors for increased services, and establishing a service area is a legitimate way to finance them.

Taxpayers in the county's unincorporated area are accustomed to "county general," Cabrillo College and a school district tax being listed on their tax bills. And, many of them also have seen fees included for refuse, roads and lighting.

That second category is about to be doubled in the next few years with police, library and parks. The general public needs to be aware of what is about to happen and what it will cost, and the Board of Supervisors should do what it can to let them know before they are surprised by their tax bills.

Not only will that save a lot of time but also increase credibility of government in the eyes of many citizens.