

SPECIAL DISTRICT ADMINISTRATOR CERTIFICATION

GETTING READY FOR THE EXAM...

It was a real hurdle receiving approval to take the exam although I had been in Special Districts for about eight years at the time – 3 years as a board member and a further five years as General Manager. I came from a maritime industry background where I had been Master of the largest and most technically advanced vessels then under the American flag. I had a degree in nautical science from the California Maritime Academy. This was not the typical business or public administration track. I had taken a few courses at Oregon State University in accounting and additional course work in governance, economics and human resources from the University of Colorado; and a number of technical courses that had been geared towards my maritime career. I literally fell into a Special Districts by being elected to the Board of Commissioners of the San Mateo County Harbor District, and later resigned to accept the Interim General Manager's position when the long time General Manager left to return to city management. I then accepted a full time General Manager's position with the Moss Landing Harbor District. While in Special Districts I took advantage of every opportunity offered by the California Special Districts Association for additional leadership training as I sought to become the best that I could be. Prior to coming ashore I had reached the top of my chosen career. I would do no less in Special Districts.

I was accepted and began studying in earnest. I knew I was already technically prepared for the exam, but I had to get into the right frame of mind. I resurrected all of the course materials that I had acquired through the many CSDA courses. I pulled my leadership books out of storage. Although I already knew the specific laws and codes that governed my district, I made a special effort to master as many as I could.

I had already adopted the personal philosophy that laws such as the Brown Act and Public Records Act were *minimum* standards of public agency conduct. I went on to study the servant-leader relationship and became a serious student and advocate of Policy Governance.

The time came and I was ready. I knew the material and I was determined to be the best.

...EXAM DAY...

The day of exam was hot in the Salinas Valley. I drove down from Moss Landing to a water district office near Templeton. The air conditioner in my truck was not working and I arrived sweating. The conference room was set for the exam and if I remember correctly there were about twelve candidates set for this, the very first examination given for the newly created, Special Districts Administrator certification. I don't remember being nervous as that is not in my nature. I do remember being ready to go and get it done.

The exam proctor was very professional and after explaining the ground rules, got us started on time.

After two swigs of bottled water, and arranging my writing instruments on the table, I opened the exam materials and began. After perusing the exam I knew that my education, background and CSDA training had all served me well. I was ready.

About two hours or so later I put down my writing materials, packed up my water bottle, and turned in my exam package. I didn't review. I was finished. I turned in my materials and still remember everyone looking up with expressions on their faces saying "he can't be finished already?"

I was first out from the first class. I drove back up the valley to Moss Landing and returned to work.

...NOTIFICATION...

I can't remember how long it took to get the results back but I can remember Linda Horning, my colleague and assistant at the time, and now General Manager of the Moss Landing Harbor District, handing me the package when it arrived. I looked at the letter. I smiled. I asked Linda for hammers and nails and together we hung the plaque on the wall of my office in a place of honor among the other honors and awards of multiple careers.

...AND NOW...

I left Special Districts in September 2001 and accepted a position as General Manager for a property owners association and have moved through a succession of similar positions until 2007 when I accepted the position of General Manager of Warner Springs Ranch, a 250-room "old California" resort in Southern California. I have not been able to keep my certification current as the CEU's I now take from the Community Associations Institute do not translate across to special districts. It's a shame, because the jobs are so similar – much like a community services district as I manage a fire department, independent water service, waste water plant, recreation amenities, etc.

Certification as a Special Districts Administrator has served me well, and continues to serve me as I serve the constituents (guests) for whom I work. The principles of public service and leadership transcend industries and careers. The spirit and intent of legislation such as the Brown Act, Public Records Act, Public contracting laws all work well even in the private sector.

The similarities between an elected Board of Directors of a community association and a special district are far greater than the differences.

I would not be where I am now had it not been for my experience in special districts and Certification as a Special Districts Administrator.

Jim Stilwell