

What the heck is a CSA?

By Tim Seufert, NBS Managing Director

County Service Areas (CSAs) are a somewhat-unknown yet robust form of California local government. A CSA can fund and provide a wide range of services and facilities, typically but not exclusively in unincorporated areas. The goal is to “promote the public peace, health, safety, and general welfare.” These services often include a mix of the following:

- Fire protection and suppression services
- Police services
- Ambulance services
- Road maintenance
- Parks and open space maintenance
- Broadband internet

And uniquely in Napa County, a CSA can acquire, construct, lease, or maintain farmworker housing, per a 2017 change to the California Government Code. In summary, ***a CSA may provide any service or facility that a county is authorized to perform.***

Examples of common CSAs include:

- ⇒ In San Diego County, CSA No.135 provides two distinctly separate activities: a district-wide regional communications system and fire protection and emergency medical services (EMS) within a restricted service area of the CSA.
- ⇒ CSA 10 in Yolo County provides water, sewer, storm drain, street lighting and public landscaping services.

A CSA can be funded by a wide variety of methods, including:

- Fees
- Standby charge
- Rates
- Other charges

For other charges, a CSA can enact special taxes, benefit assessments, and ***property-related fees for any such property-related services it provides,***

subject of course to the approval processes under Article XIII D of the State Constitution. This broad ability to charge property-related fees is rather noteworthy. A CSA may receive general property tax revenues, and can incur debt to finance facilities under certain circumstances. Note that a CSA is not an independent special district.

In 2018, Assembly Bill 1999 established net neutrality rules for local agencies that provide broadband services, and expanded the types of local agencies that may provide broadband infrastructure, services, or both. Senate Bill 1458, which became effective January 1, 2009, was a complete overhaul of the existing legal framework, which had not been comprehensively reviewed for nearly six decades. The “new and improved” CSA law was renumbered, with the number of sections reduced from 166 to 50. Importantly, SB 1458 aligns the CSA law with the State Constitution and the provisions of Propositions 13 and 218.

As a result of SB 1458, the CSA law was updated to:

- Restructure the formation process and consolidate basic powers
- Clarify CSA relationships with LAFCos
- Allow CSAs to provide any service that a county may provide
- Streamline use of zones
- Reference compliance with provisions of Proposition 218
- Recognize the county board of supervisors as the governing authority
- Require formal budgets and financial reports

The framework is there for CSAs to flourish in the 21st Century.

