General Written Public Comment, submitted to California Redistricting Commission

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Regarding COI input meeting on July 20, 2021, Zone G

Written testimony regarding a description of Central Sierra Community of Interest (COI) for creation of a proposed new Assembly District

What brings us together: The Central Sierra Nevada is a geographically distinct area that comprises the communities that abut the crest of the Sierra Nevada mountain range (Inyo, Mono, Alpine, Amador, Tuolumne, and Calaveras Counties) and areas east of the ridge of the Sierra Nevada in Nevada, Placer and El Dorado Counties (including the Lake Tahoe Basin and Truckee). (See proposed map on last page.) The community of interest (COI) is mainly rural and frontier. Our community is bonded by the type of person who chooses to live here; we are people who live away from urban centers and many of us consider ourselves stewards of the rugged wilderness we inhabit. The economy of the Central Sierra, this COI, depends upon recreation such as skiing, camping, fishing, hiking and backpacking, and also small businesses that often support these recreational activities.

Shared interest and challenges: This region includes many national forest and national park (such as Yosemite) gateway communities who face similar issues around housing, employment/jobs, transportation, and sustainable tourism. Our community also includes many vacation and retirement property owners. The community faces many challenges including adequate funding of forest management to mitigate and address wildfires, concern about water rights, access to broadband, and access to healthcare. Our lands have a history of extractive use and are appealing to extractive industries, and we often feel as if we are left to protect these places from corporate interests, especially foreign mining companies, without adequate governmental support.

The people in this COI share concerns about making the state and federal governments provide resources to our rural communities and therefore request the creation of representative districts that will allow us to speak with one collective voice, rather than splitting our COI into unrelated State Assembly, Senate and Federal Congressional districts. For example, currently, our Assembly Member (5th AD) for Mono County, Frank Bigelow, is based in Madera County. I would argue that including Madera in our proposed district violates the rule of contiguity; while it might appear on a map that Madera is contiguous to Mono, the reality is that we are separated by a mountain range, which makes it virtually impossible to traverse between the two counties in the winter when the passes are closed.

Our State Senator is based in urban Fresno County, and our current Congressional member is based in San Bernardino County, making it inordinately challenging to gain coordinated state and federal support and funding. Because none of these representatives is based in our respective areas, there is often a lack of understanding and concern about those issues that
are important to us, and therefore these representatives cannot serve as adequate advocates for us and our needs.

The main transportation corridor in the Eastern Sierra runs north-south with US 395 connecting the Eastern Sierra and the rest of the Sierra; 395 straddles the Sierra Nevada mountain range on the Eastern side. Other main corridors are SR 89, US 50 and I-80, which run east-west. Again, it is important to note that the only passes that are accessible for crossing the central Sierra for much of the year are US 50 and I-80. For that reason, it is crucial when thinking about “contiguous areas,” one of the Commission’s criteria, that the Commission understand that Madera County, while contiguous to Mono on a map, is actually separated by a mountain range that cannot be crossed during the winter months, and therefore is not really contiguous or connected, as noted above. The other counties/areas in the COI lie either directly on or have access to and from 395.

**Access to broadband:** One of the major issues facing the areas in our COI because of our rural nature is access to broadband. The COVID-19 pandemic has truly exposed an injustice that most of us knew about and had to live with, but that was inescapable during the Safer at Home orders. Schoolchildren needed broadband to attend school; the Mammoth Unified School District alone had close to 50 families who had no access to the Internet and who had to use their resources to obtain cell phones that had WiFi that could be used as hot spots. In 2020/2021 that should never have been an issue anywhere in the US. Especially with the move toward telehealth, and given the limited access to health care which is another issue facing our counties (see below), access to Internet becomes especially important. As many people move to or live in rural areas who telecommute for work, access to reliable broadband becomes increasingly important. For example, I am retired from my position as a Professor of Political Science at Whittier College in LA who has chosen to live in this area for quality-of-life reasons. However, I continue to remain engaged with my field and my colleagues, many of whom live not only in different parts of the United States but around the world. Access to quality broadband is essential to my research as well as access to those colleagues. Because of my experience and my field, I have been asked to teach classes for universities around the world, which I can only do if I have reliable Internet connections. And at a time when professional conferences are being held remotely, ensuring quality and reliable Internet access is the only way to guarantee that I can remain engaged as a professional member of my field.

Right now, there is one Internet service provider in our area in Mono County, and their service is uneven at best. While there are a number of bills currently in the California legislature to address the broadband issue, it is imperative that we have representatives who are aware of and share these concerns, and who can advocate on our behalf.

**Access to healthcare:** One of the major issues facing those of us in this COI is access to basic healthcare and especially access to specialty care. Combined with the constraints imposed by the pandemic, this has contributed to a growth in telemedicine, which brings with it other issues as noted above. For in-person care, many people have to travel long distances, especially for specialty care, as that care is often more available in Nevada (Reno) or large urban areas in California. Many of our residents have their health coverage through Medicare/MediCAL, and therefore cannot get treated in Nevada; the major hospital is in Reno which is also the nearest
trauma center. In case of health emergency (e.g., heat attack, automobile accident, etc.) the individual is generally flown by Medivac to Renown in Reno. Again, that assumes that the individual has insurance that allows them to be treated there (out of the State of California) or else the alternative is that they are transported back to a facility in California which further delays necessary care. This is not apocryphal; we know that this happens. I am sure that any of us has examples of someone this has happened to. We need representatives who understand these challenges and are willing to work with the state and federal levels to address them.

**Insurance issues and concerns:** An issue that Sierra Counties share pertains to earthquake, fire and homeowner’s insurance, and the need to ensure that we have access to insurance, if only through a California common pool (as is the case with Earthquake insurance). Because of the increased threat posed by wildfires, flooding, etc. some insurance companies are trying to pull out of these markets or limit building in some rural areas. For those of us who live here, we are very conscious of the need for fire mitigation efforts and “defensible space.” We need advocates at the state and Congressional levels who will fight to ensure that we have the insurance coverage we need and that, in the event of catastrophe such as fire or flood, that the insurance companies are responsible for paying the claims.

**Access to airport:** For many of us, the major air transportation hub is Reno-Tahoe International Airport. There had been limited air service in and out of Mammoth, first by Alaska Airlines and then United, which connected to major airports such as LAX, San Francisco and Denver. That made it possible to connect to most of the United States and even globally, at most times of the year. However, the limits imposed by the pandemic made it financially impossible to continue to service this area, thereby requiring a drive to Reno. While some parts of the COI can access San Francisco (SFO) or Sacramento at some times of the year, it is difficult to do so during winter. There is speculation that Bishop (in Inyo County) might start serving as a regional hub for connecting flights to LAX and SFO, but that remains uncertain at this point. We need representatives at the State and Federal levels who can advocate for the creation of regional hubs that will facilitate air travel, short of a major trip to Reno, LAX or SFO. It is important to note that having that kind of access will enable more tourists to take advantage of our area (skiing in the winter, especially) which has important economic implications. It means people who need to travel for business, which is starting again, will be able to do so, and those who want to travel for leisure will be able to do so more easily.

**In conclusion:** The members of this COI have worked to advocate for many of the issues we are raising, such as better broadband, but we are facing large corporations that pay little attention to those of us in a rural area. Similarly, better air access was tried only because of a major push from Mammoth Mountain and the corporation behind it (at various times Intrawest and now Alterra). But without that large corporate backing, airlines pay little attention to our needs. In short, we have come together to advocate for many of those things that are important to us but it has also become apparent that we need State and Federal Representatives to advocate for us if our collective voices are to be heard.

In this document, which I will summarize in public comments, I hope that I have made the case for the creation of a new AD with lines drawn to better reflect our COI and what is important to us.