General Written Public Comment, submitted to California Redistricting Commission

Submitted by Joyce P. Kaufman  June Lake, CA 93529)

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

Written testimony regarding a description of Central Sierra Community of Interest (COI)

I submitted written comments prior to our last Zone G comment period (July 20, 2021) but the narrative below augments and elaborates on some of those points, plus it includes information that has become available since that date.

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, Mariposa and Calaveras Counties) and areas east of the crest of the Sierra Nevada in Nevada, Placer and El Dorado Counties (including the Lake Tahoe Basin and Truckee). In addition to the above-named counties, any new district, Congressional, Assembly or State Senate, should also include parts of Madera County east of the San Joaquin River, which includes the Devils Postpile National Monument which is accessed from Mammoth. (See proposed map on last page.)

The community of interest (COI) described here 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. At the present time, none of our state or federal representatives (Assembly, Senate and Congressional) have offices in our proposed area and I daresay, none of them routinely visits this area. The district office of our
current member of Congress, Jay Obernolte, is in Hesperia, certainly a world apart from what we are proposing for the Central Sierra district. His web site, while mentioning a bill he did not support regarding wildfire management (“The bill would classify over one million additional acres of federal land as “wilderness” in California and other states, increasing federal control over wide swaths of land and restricting forest management and wildfire mitigation measures.” February 26, 2021) does not mention anything about the Tamarack fire, which affected parts of his district significantly, especially north Mono County. The Central Sierra COI has little in common with San Bernardino, which is the major population center for what is now the CA 08 Congressional District. While the current CA 08 does include parts of Death Valley and Joshua Tree, these are very different habitats than what we experience here in the Central Sierra.

Our current member of the Assembly, Frank Bigelow, is based in the south-west portion of Madera County. While it might appear on the map that Madera is contiguous to Mono, we are separated by a mountain range which makes it virtually impossible to traverse in the winter when the passes are closed. Furthermore, on his web site under “My District,” as of this writing Mr. Bigelow did not have anything posted, despite that fact that a major wildfire, the Tamarack fire, affected parts of his district in Alpine County. That should be an indicator of how far removed Mr. Bigelow is from a significant part of his district and speaks directly to the need for a representative who truly understands and represents this community of interest. Our State Senator, Andreas Borgeas, is based in Fresno and has spent virtually his entire career in that area. As was the case with Assemblyman Bigelow, there is nothing on his web site about the Tamarack fire that affected his constituents in Alpine County.

The fact that none of our elected representatives is from, or even has an office in, our area makes it inordinately challenging to gain coordinated state and federal support and funding. In addition, the fact that none of these elected representatives has anything on his web site about the current fires raging in their respective districts is telling. This would underscore that 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 Sierras; 395 straddles the Sierra Nevada mountain range on the Eastern side. (As a side-note, a significant portion of 395 was closed from north of Bridgeport to the Nevada border in July because of the Tamarack Fire making transit between the north and south extremely difficult.) 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 the western part of 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 (Suddenlink/Altice) 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.

The Mono County grand jury recently issued a report regarding broadband in Mono County that found, in part:

Some areas of Mono County are underserved with little or no broadband access. Other areas that have access suffer from frequent outages and unacceptable customer service.

The increase in demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shelter-in-place orders have highlighted shortcomings in broadband access in our communities. Overall demand has skyrocketed: online school, remote work, multiple devices per person connected to the Internet for communication as well as entertainment have driven this demand. At the same time there has been increased second homeowner occupation and tourist visitation. Due to the delivery methods of entertainment and information, demand will continue to increase.

Members of the Mono County Grand Jury are aware of widespread dissatisfaction with the current state of broadband access. While the Grand Jury cannot investigate private contracts between individuals and independent service providers, the Grand Jury can investigate local broadband availability, shortcomings, and potential solutions that are within the purview of our local government entities.¹

In short, while the installation of Digital 395, a 450-mile backbone extending from Reno, Nevada to Barstow, California, has improved access to broadband in the COI discussed here, as long as we are tied to a single provider, there is no incentive for that company to improve service. As the Delta variant of the coronavirus is surging which could result in more restrictions, we will be back to the same issues that we have had to confront through the pandemic regarding broadband.

The Grand Jury report also notes:

Under the Digital Infrastructure and Video Competition Act of 2006 (DIVCA) television and Internet service providers hold franchise agreements with the state of California rather than with the local counties or municipalities. This means that neither Mono County nor the Town of Mammoth Lakes has the authority to terminate or replace the current franchise holder - Suddenlink (Altice). Only the state of California has that power (emphasis added). The county and town can by themselves, or in cooperation with other jurisdictions, try to influence the California Public Utilities Commission (PUC) to pressure Suddenlink (Altice) to better their performance and customer service.

This is another reason why those of us who live in this area need representatives at the State and Federal levels who understand this problem and are willing to do something to address it. We need representatives at the state and congressional levels who can appreciate these concerns and 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., heart 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 and LAX is easily a 5 to 6 hour drive from Mono and Inyo Counties. 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. Even if this were to happen, the plan is that the service would only be for winter months (December into March), which for those of us who live here is inadequate. 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 Congressional District with lines drawn to better reflect our COI and what is important to us.
up Sierra crest to border with I-8
San Joaquin River as natural break in Madera County