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# Some Facts About West Covina's Proposed Health Department

By Jerri Potras

The City of West Covina council majority intends to have a local municipal health department. It is a controversial effort that started during the Covid pandemic lockdown in reaction to the state and county government's "one size fits all" approach to public health. The current city council is split on the issue. Resident concerns grow.

West Covina was not the only city that considered breaking away from the County of Los Angeles Department of Public Health (LADPH). Some cities conducted a feasibility study, a formal assessment that a proposed project or service will succeed in terms of costs, legal requirements, operational requirements, etc. West Covina did not do so despite a state audit, the State Auditor's ranking of West Covina as a high financial risk city, and the State Auditor's recommendation West Covina "prepare financial analysis that evaluates both the short-term and long-term financial implications of significant decisions" (State Audit Report 2020-806). A comparison of the two approaches sheds light on resident concerns.

**Feasibility study approach.** Cities that prepared a feasibility study found health officer duties and responsibilities are extensive, legally mandated, and

costly. Legally mandated services must be funded regardless of a city's budget. Grants and other funding sources are not guaranteed. Staff are needed. A January 2021 City of San Dimas report stated the City of Pasadena leverages "other City departments [police, fire, and paramedic services] to fulfill the obligations mandated for a Health Department/Health Officer". The portion of property tax residents and businesses are assessed by the county for county health services would not be returned to the city. After the study, most cities found it impractical or have taken a "wait and see" approach.

**West Covina's approach.** West Covina residents were introduced to the concept at the December 1, 2020 City Council meeting when then Mayor Tony Wu presented his plan—the East San Gabriel Valley Regional Health Department—as an alternative to LADPH services. Wu explained he had spoken with mayors of seven local cities and directors of two local hospitals and that all had expressed interest in exploring creating a regional health department. Wu emphasized a regional health department would lower costs and be more responsive to regional needs. Wu conveyed the urgency to act and council consensus

made a roll call vote unnecessary. That hurried discussion laid the foundation for what would follow.

From December 1, 2020 to February 23, 2021, a mere 88 days, West Covina contracted with a physician to provide "consulting services relating to exploring options for setting up a local health department" and served notice to Los Angeles County, it was terminating health officer services. West Covina's health department would be outsourced and financed via licenses; permits; transfer taxes; county, state, and federal grants; and philanthropic donations. No area cities or hospitals were listed in approved agreement. The project changed, without explanation, from a regional to a local municipal health department.

West Covina hopes to get state approval by the end of 2024.

**Resident Concerns.** Despite resident backlash on this issue, the city council majority pushed forward in what many residents see as deficit spending and reckless actions. There has never been a "financial analysis" as required by the State Auditor. West Covina, we have a problem.

*Jerri Potras is a long time West Covina resident and activist with West Covina Neighbors.*