

Tax collector solicits opinions for bill's 'new look'

By **Elizabeth Marie Himchak**

San Diego taxpayers will receive a new and easier-to-read property tax bill this fall.

In an effort to make more than a million tax bills more user-friendly, San Diego County Treasurer-Tax Collector Dan McAllister asked residents for layout suggestions before the new bills are printed.

McAllister solicited comments during the June 7 Rancho Penasquitos Planning Board meeting.

"We received many complaints about the old tax bill," McAllister told residents. "It was ugly, monochromatic and had small fonts.

"There are a lot of things people gripe about (regarding their taxes), but complaints over the tax bill's look reached new heights," McAllister added.

The tax bill's current look — designed a couple of years ago — was the first revision since 1951.

McAllister described it as a work in progress with more revisions planned for this year.

"I try to go out to the people rather than hire consultants and have focus groups," McAllister said.

The current bill's blue sections were implemented after a boy in elementary school said people like blue because it is softer, nicer and soothing — like the sky and ocean.

Modifications he showed residents included highlighting the amount due in a yellow starburst and highlighting the parcel number because people had difficulty finding it on their bills.

He said when www.sdtreastax.com was printed on the bill, online tax payments increased by 40 percent.

When the Web site address was

written in red last year, the number of payments doubled and more than \$1 billion was collected online.

Other changes include a watermark indicating the type of bill and a colored pie chart insert explaining where tax money goes. The previous chart was printed on the envelope, often damaged when the bill was opened.

McAllister said more than 9,000 taxpayers — confused about the amount due and penalty amount — paid the penalty despite paying on time.

Since August, his office returned over \$1.6 million to 6,500 taxpayers.

Taxpayers due a refund, but not yet located are listed on the department's Web site.

"All names are listed alphabetically, so see if you are owed money, it's clearly not the county's money and I urge you to claim it," McAllister said.

During the chairman's report, Joost Bende gave updates on a few projects that came before the board during the last year.

Bende said Doubletree Golf Resort representatives met with him and board members Jeanette Waltz and Dan Lee to receive feedback about possible property changes.

"We told them to try again," Bende said, citing the plan's failure to comply with community wishes stated during workshops and at the planning board last year.

He said the plans — based upon some residents' comments that if housing had to be added to the property they would prefer single family units over condos — showed single family homes spread over the entire golf course.

"We told them it wouldn't fly," Bende said.

Waltz said they emphasized the community's desire to keep the entire golf course, as shown in the community plan.

"They need to concentrate on the hotel," Waltz said. "They should make it a more desirable location and center for the community."

She said the board would consider a hotel expansion, such as a third story.

Lee said they also suggested hotel access from Carmel Mountain Road instead of Penasquitos Drive.

Bende summarized by saying the plans shown were "an unacceptable proposition for us."

"It was a very thoughtful discussion," said Diane Gaynor, project spokesperson for Windstar Communities, the company coordinating the Doubletree's planning effort.

"We heard what (the board members) had to say and hope to come back with something that is met with a different response," Gaynor added.

Gaynor further said they would continue their open approach as demonstrated before and that this meeting was to gauge whether their current direction was acceptable.

While Bende also announced the proposed Muslim Community Center in Black Mountain Ranch is possibly up for sale, when asked for confirmation, MCC public relations director Anita Tallman said that is not the case.

"We do not have the land on the market," Tallman said. "However, we have received unsolicited offers on the land.

"At this time we've started our design phase by hiring an architectural firm ... and (while) we have no plans to sell the land, we continue to evaluate our options for the project," Tallman said.

The board approved the replacement of the 18-inch storm drain in Watson Ranch Creek Culvert with a 5-by-5-foot box culvert.