A History of the Orange County Environmental Management Agency
by Chris Jepsen
Orange County Archives

Orange County's Environmental Management Agency (EMA), which existed from 1974 to 1997, consolidated the former departments of Planning, Building, Flood Control, Roads, Surveyor, Solid Waste, Water Pollution, and Harbors Beaches and Parks into a single body which reported directly to the Orange County Board of Supervisors. EMA's history is the story of that consolidation, of change and challenge during a period of tremendous growth, and of an agency dissolution that begat new agencies and departments. The roots of EMA reach back to the beginnings of the county itself. And its legacy still profoundly affects the shape and direction of Orange County today.

In 1976, at H. G. Osborne's request, the Board of Supervisors declared a cartoon acorn woodpecker (later named "Welcome Woody") the official mascot for the county's parks.

When Orange County seceded from Los Angeles County, in 1889, the local population was about 15,000. When the Orange County Courthouse opened in 1901, the modest building was able to comfortably house the Superior Court as well as every county agency except the Sheriff's Department.

As time went on, government agencies grew, and new agencies and special districts were formed to meet the needs of the public. The stories of a number of these organizations are important to the understanding of the eventual creation of the Environmental Management Agency.

COUNTY SURVEYOR

Until relatively recently, surveyors and engineers were somewhat synonymous. Every civil engineer was trained in survey work. So it was that until the 1950s the Orange County Surveyor was not only in charge of measuring and mapping the land, but also oversaw what we would think of today as engineering, planning and related functions. These functions would, decades later, form much of the core of the Environmental Management Agency.

The election of October 1921 made Warren K. "Cap" Hillyard the sixth man to serve as Orange County Surveyor. He would hold the position for over 33 years.[1] He was liked by the public and admired by his professional peers. But in the post-WWII years, as he grew older and the county grew exponentially, many of Hillyard's powers and duties were gradually reassigned to other agencies or departments. By the early 1950s, many county functions once unified under his control were spread out across a wide variety of organizations that didn't always work hand-in-hand.

County Surveyor W. K. "Cap" Hillyard

ROAD DEPARTMENT

It wasn't until 1912 that the Orange County Board of Supervisors passed a road bond to begin the process of dealing with county road development – a construction effort undertaken by County Surveyor John L. McBride in his additional capacity as Superintendent of Highways. This effort, known as the "Good Roads Plan," owed much to the technical skills of longtime County Surveyor (and later Supervisor) Col. S. H. Finley, and to the political savvy of Supervisor Tom Talbert.[2]

McBride was in office from 1911 to 1921 and was the nephew of Col. Finley. According to historian Stan Oftelie, McBride had virtually no staff and took directions and advice directly from the Supervisors. Finley – first as Surveyor and later as Supervisor – was always deeply involved in engineering decisions.

By the time McBride left, the county had at least 160.9 miles of paved roads. He also directed the route survey for Pacific Coast Highway through Orange County, which was "laid out along purely scenic lines that follow the curve of the coast, disclosing the continuous panorama of splendid views." This iconic coastal route was completed in 1926.[3]

The first County Highway Commission was appointed in 1915 and they soon hired engineer Dan S. Halliday to provide designs for additional expansions to Orange County's system of improved highways.[4]

One of Orange County's best known engineers, Nat H. Neff, served as Construction Engineer for the County Highway Commission from 1914 to 1917 and as Roads Division Engineer until 1925. He served as County Engineer from 1927 to 1937. Both in and out of the county, Neff's impact on local infrastructure from 1912 through the 1950s was enormous.[5]

In 1955 the Board of Supervisors appointed Allen S. Koch as both Road Commissioner (head of the Road Department) and County Surveyor.[6] This was in part a reaction to the Collier-Burns Act of 1947. This state legislation raised road management to the county level and required each county to appoint a single Road Commissioner for all road districts. Prior to this act, Orange County had five separate road districts. Their boundaries match the five supervisorial districts and each was headed by its respective county supervisor.[7]

FLOOD CONTROL DISTRICT

With many of Orange County's communities built on alluvial plains or near creeks or rivers, the ability to control floods is crucial. The big flood of 1916 started the wheels turning that eventually led to the 1927 creation of the Orange County Flood Control District (OCFCD) to deal with flood control engineering, with groundwater management, and related matters. Prior to that, consulting engineers like H. Clay Kellogg and J. B. Lippincott and some small local special districts handled drainage and flood control for the County. Minimizing damage from floods, repairing flood damage, draining the marshy coastal plain, conserving water, and reining in the Santa Ana River are themes that would appear again and again throughout the history of Orange County's public works-related agencies.[8]

Although the members of the Board of Supervisors also sat as the OCFCD board, this special district was not technically part of county government. In a sense, the creation of OCFCD marked the beginning of the gradual erosion of the Surveyor's control over all engineering functions.

Efforts to develop more substantial flood control infrastructure were incomplete when the flood years of 1937 and 1938 brought death and massive destruction to Orange County. Although tragic, the losses of 1938 ensured that more and better flood control measures would be funded in the future. Many new levees, channels and dams – including Prado Dam on the Santa Ana River – were constructed. Eventually, most of the groundwater management responsibilities were shifted from the OCFCD to the Orange County Water District (founded in 1933). During the post-WWII

boom, even more flood control infrastructure was built and streams were widened, deepened and channelized.[9]

OCFCD remained legally separate from county government until it was finally folded into the EMA in the 1970s.[10]

HARBORS BEACHES & PARKS DISTRICT

Orange County's park system began when James Irvine donated the 186 acres of Orange County Park (now Irvine Regional Park). The second county park, Sigler Park, was ultimately purchased by the City of Westminster in 1960. And what's now O'Neill Park was donated to the county by the Rancho Mission Viejo's O'Neill family in 1948.

In the years after World War II, it became clear to the County and to the Associated Chambers of Commerce that open space would soon be at a premium, and an organized effort to preserve more park land throughout the county was undertaken. In 1963, the County developed its first Master Plan of Regional Parks. Many more properties – including beaches – were identified for future use as parks. In 1971, a county ordinance was passed requiring developers to dedicate land for parks or to pay a fee instead. This greatly expanded the county park system, especially in southern Orange County, where development was then going full tilt.[11]

The story of the County's Harbors begins somewhat differently. With hopes stirring for what would become Orange County's first developed harbor, at Newport Bay, the Board of Supervisors approved a petition to create the Orange County Harbor District in 1933. Through 1971, the district remained legally separate from county government, although the district director reported to the Board of Supervisors. In 1949, the Board approved initial planning for the creation of Dana Point Harbor.[12] The initial portion of this harbor opened in 1971. The smaller Sunset Marina Park opened in 1969.

In 1971, the Harbor District and the County Parks Department were merged (as directed by the state legislature) to become the Harbors, Beaches & Parks District (HBPD).

PLANNING DEPARTMENT

The Board of Supervisors created the Orange County Planning Commission in December 1929. Initially, they operated without regular staff, relying on various county departments and contract staff for technical assistance as needed. Numerous factors, including new state zoning mandates, the introduction of land use ordinances (1935), and – perhaps most importantly – devastation from the Long Beach Earthquake (1933), led to the addition of permanent staff.

"The Big Quake convinced the board they needed enforceable building standards and zoning rules," says historian Stan Oftelie. "The Board was very reluctant to do this, believing individuals – and not government – should decide how land should be used. The quake convinced them different standards were needed, pushing the county into the planning, zoning and building areas."

Later, some of those duties would be spun off into stand-alone county departments.

As the planning department grew, a Planning Director position was added and the office was broken into sections. The various sections were responsible for the General Plan, master and specific plans, zoning, and special studies. But Planning continued simply as Commission staff

and did not *officially* become a department (OCPD) until about 1962.[13] By 1949, planning personnel consisted of the planning director, land planner, planning engineer, three planning assistants and three stenographer clerks.[14]

Forest Dickason, who became Planning Director in the late 1950s, was concerned not only with the rapid development in the north and central Orange County, but also with the impending development of south county. Bracing the agency for the onslaught, Dickason introduced the concepts of master planning and a new zoning category called the Planned Community District. The latter of these allowed large land owners like the Irvine Co. and Rancho Mission Viejo to create their own zoning codes within their respective planned communities. However, OCPD retained the responsibility of review and approval for such plans.[15]

In the early 1960s, the agency included the Advance Planning Division, which focused on the General Plan; the Planning Administration Division, which oversaw zoning, subdivisions and variances; the Mapping Division, and a Clerical Division.

Between 1965 and 1969 the department was reorganized three times. New branches of the department included a County-Wide Coordination Division, and a Policy Formation Division to manage the many appointed committees and commissions that sprang up in that era. The department also began supplying support staff to the Local Agency Formation Commission. And the other planning duties were shuffled around from one division to another (under a variety of names) during these years.

By the early 1970s, the department was heavily occupied with expanded General Plan activities and with work generated by the new California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), including Environmental Impact Reports (EIRs) for most development projects. Planning underwent one last reorganization in 1973 – But it hardly mattered. Everything would be re-worked the following year, when Planning became part of EMA.

BUILDING & SAFETY DEPARTMENT

The duties of Building & Safety originated as a two-man Building Department, developed as part of the Planning Department in the wake of the 1933 Long Beach Earthquake. It was later separated into its own department.

The goal of the Building & Safety Department was to protect lives, property, and public welfare by regulating the design, construction, quality of materials, use and occupancy, location and maintenance of buildings.[16] Functions of the department included plan check; land use administration; and inspections for plumbing, /ventilating, electrical and structural code requirements.[17]

REAL PROPERTY SERVICES DEPARTMENT

The right of way agent or division, under the Road Department, originally managed real estate (buying, renting, selling, etc) for the county's many properties. They were spun off into their own Right-of-Way Department, separate from Roads, in 1953.[18] In 1964 the department became Real Property Services (RPS or DORPS) with real-estate-duties for road and flood-control right-of-ways being reassigned to the Road Department and the OCFCD.[19]

RPS provided real estate services not only to county departments, but also to most special districts and other agencies under the jurisdiction of the Board of Supervisors. Divisions within the RPS included the Acquisition Division, Title and Escrow Division, Management Division, Valuation Division, and an Engineering Services Section to provide maps and legal descriptions for county-owned land.[20]

"The growing number of county departments dealing with development issues – planning, zoning, building, road, flood control, air pollution control, water, sanitation, parks, city incorporation decisions and a variety of other areas," Oftelie writes, began to evolve in earnest "when the Orange County Water District was formed in 1933 with an independent Board of Directors (a Board led by future Supervisor Willis Warner, a USC trained engineer). Variations on this theme involved sewers and sanitation (where once again Warner helped create new sanitation districts) and transportation (where the regional Arterial Highway Financing Program and Master Plan of Arterial Highways programs evolved over time into today's Orange County Transportation Authority). As these regional duties were shared with cities (except for flood), the county focused increasingly on services to county unincorporated territory."

THE POST-WAR BOOM

Around 1953, County Surveyor Cap Hillyard began advocating for a new Department of Public Works which would have reconsolidated some of these duties in accordance with a recently instated law that allowed counties to combine survey and engineering functions into a single department. The Board of Supervisors adopted his advice only after Hillyard's 1954 retirement, when they made Allen S. Koch both Road Commissioner and Surveyor. Still, some related functions remained part of other departments.

As new subdivisions and other development crowded into the county, Surveyor/Road Commissioner Al Koch and the Chief Engineer of Flood Control, Herbert George Osborne, became the kingpins of public works. The soft spoken and politically savvy Osborne was known as H.G.O. to his employees, or "the Silver Fox" to those who knew his negotiating style.[21] A commander in the Navy during World War II, Osborne prided himself on running agencies like military units, with a clear, top-down command structure. According to longtime county engineer and administrator Carl Nelson, Osborne "commanded – not demanded – blind obedience."[22]

Thanks to rapid development and population growth, many of the county's individual departments were under enormous pressure and found their 1930s-style management structures less than adequate. It became increasingly clear that business as usual would have to change. At some point, those departments would have to be restructured, streamlined, and rethought, in order to make them viable in the modern era. What form that would take was still unclear.

A decade-by-decade look at Orange County's population numbers illustrates the scale of the changes faced by county government during the Mid-20th Century[23]:

    1930: 118,674
    1940: 130,760
    1950: 216,224
    1960: 703,925
    1970: 1,420,386
    1980: 1,931,570

As the post-war boom continued, the weight on the shoulders of the Board of Supervisors grew, and they needed to delegate more of their oversight functions. In 1968, they established the County Administrative

Office and appointed its first County Administrative Officer (CAO), Bob Thomas. Among the many challenges that faced Thomas was the low level of organization and cooperation in the public works/surveyor-related departments. This was also a sore point for the Board, which in 1970 drove home its dissatisfaction by refusing the customary annual reappointment of the various department heads.

According to retired county planner Richard Ramella, the political machine run by Dr. Lou Cella made a play in the very early 1970s to have various county department heads dealing with land use replaced with people they could control. The staff of the Planning Department thwarted the scheme by tipping off District Attorney Cecil Hicks before anything happened.[24]

A SUPERAGENCY IS BORN

Ralph A. Diedrich

"The Board of Supervisors and the Chief Administrative Officer wanted to bring many departments together," writes Oftelie, "to reduce duplication of effort and streamline an often confusing process where big-time developers and citizens seeking simple building permits felt they were being ping-ponged between a variety of government agencies."

Into this fray walked Fullerton City Councilman and former developer Ralph Argue Diedrich, who was elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1973, and was even more dissatisfied with the status quo. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Steve Emmons remembered that Diedrich "filled a power void with his drill-sergeant aggressiveness. He was in control of the board almost from the moment he arrived. If an issue mattered at all… Diedrich pulled it over onto his plate, and the other supervisors let him. He racked up some genuine, significant accomplishments and reveled in the nickname it earned him: 'Super D.' [His] one overriding trait was his insistence on being in the driver's seat. If he couldn't be, he got off the bus and bought another."[25]
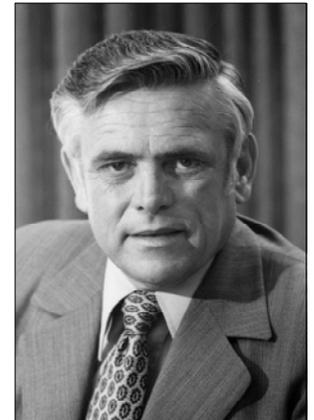
Diedrich worked to expand that power by controlling the flow of crucial funds from developers into the campaign funds of his fellow elected officials. His plans required him to make sure those developers got whatever they wanted from the County. Eventually, he was sent to prison for bribery and conspiracy. A sting operation caught him requesting a $75,000 bribe from Anaheim Hills, Inc. while in a position to cast votes favorable to that developer. But until the axe fell in 1979, Diedrich generally got what he wanted. He also made sure campaign donor developers and bribe-payers got what *they* wanted.[26]

In 1973, Diedrich wanted to have *one* person he could call on to get things done, not a web of fiefdoms that would hold things up with red tape.[27] Both for his own sake and for the sake of increasingly frustrated real estate developers, he wanted a system that was more responsive and efficient. In a way, what he wanted was a new Cap Hillyard, armed with enough resources and staff to meet the needs of a much more populous county. It seemed that reorganization might be in the offing.[28]

The notion of a "superagency," combining many government functions under one umbrella, was already a trend in the 1970s, albeit more often at the state level than local.[29] [30] At the same time, new state laws and Environmental Impact Report requirements were making land use and development processes more complicated.

This was also a period of turmoil for a number of Orange County's department heads. Planning Director Forrest Dickason had butted heads with the Board of Supervisors, and would soon resign. The *Orange County Register*, which was ramping up its investigative reporting efforts, had criticized Harbor District director Ken Sampson for traveling to Washington to seek funds for Dana Point Harbor. Al Koch retired

and was replaced by Ted McConnville, who was already slipping in favor with the Board. The cloud hanging over these department chiefs was yet another reason that the Board, led by Diedrich, put the wheels of reorganization in motion.(7)

In late 1973, Dickason left the county along with some of his key staff members, and the Board appointed Osborne as interim Planning Director. During this interim period, the County Administrative Officer, Robert E. Thomas recommended "changes in departmental structure in order to eliminate duplication of work, to consolidate departments and functions, so as to achieve maximum efficiency in county government." The report suggested that all of Orange County government could be successfully reorganized into six huge agencies: The Environmental Management Agency (EMA), Social Services, General Services Agency (GSA), Fiscal Services, Health Care, and Community Safety.[31] The general idea became known as "the agency concept," and the Board ultimately came to embrace it.

The next step was to plan the organization of each of the new super agencies. Carl Nelson remembers, "Several key players from different organizations were brought together as a committee to recommend a revised org chart. When we finished, what we had was EMA. It wasn't a democratic process, because we had differences, and when it came to an argument, Osborne was always the decider. He worked closely with Ron Novello."

Out of this process, Novello, of the CAO's office, and Clayton Parker of County Counsel drafted what became known as "Model 3b." Parts of the proposed organization were designed around programs, like planning, and other parts were organized based on a particular function, like maintenance. The plan called for four divisions under an agency director: advance planning (to do all advanced planning for county government), environmental regulation (the former Building & Safety Department - to enforce building, zoning, health, flood control and air pollution regulations), central administration (to do the agency's administrative and personnel chores), and environmental development (to handle short-term planning and development).[32] Under "development" fell the functions of flood control, road design, parks design, surveying, subdivision engineering, water quality management and public facilities. The CAO presented a general overview of the plan, which the Board approved, followed by a request for continued execution and consolidation.[33]

Thomas said the reorganization would eliminate cases of various departments working at cross-purposes or unknowingly duplicating each other's efforts. He said it would also cut 50 to 75 positions in County government, would prevent the addition of even more positions, and would save at least $8 million over five years. There had been talk of creating a superagency the year earlier[34], but Thomas had been adamantly against such programs which he said only built empires. But in 1974 he did a complete turnaround, saying that EMA would provide cost savings.

The proposed creation of EMA was controversial among the public. Environmentalists felt it made building and development easier and more political and that streamlined approvals benefitted major political donors and gave Supervisors powers previously held by county staff. Developers wanted "a clearer process [with] fewer obstacles and fewer traps where environmentalists could stall their projects," said Stan Oftelie, who was an aide to Supervisor Ralph Clark at the time. "They argued that a longer approval process cost them time and money and drove up the cost of housing, making it less and less affordable. They [environmentalists and developers] were both right to a degree."

On Jan. 28, 1974, the Board essentially adopted Model 3b and the agency model of organizational structure, with an ordinance that created the first "super agency:" The Environmental Management Agency. The ordinance immediately made EMA the parent agency over the Orange County Flood Control District and the Harbors, Beaches & Parks District. The Board also provided that they could add

additional "departments, divisions or functions of the County of Orange" to EMA by further resolutions as they saw fit.[35] The ordinance went into effect Feb. 27, 1974.

Later, ordinance 75-102 added the Planning Department, the Department of Building and Safety, the Road Department, the County Surveyor and the Department of Real Property Services to EMA. An amendment, passed in Feb. 11, 1975, folded the position of Director of Harbors, Beaches & Parks, into the position of EMA Director, and in effect also eliminated the positions of Chief Engineer and Road Commissioner.

"Diedrich … was the one who carried the definition of the EMA through the Board of Supervisors," writes Oftelie. "There were fierce objections from both environmentalists (who believed the county was retreating from open space and parks development while dramatically increasing south county densities) and developers (who were essentially *rugged individualists*) who wanted to get government out of the way so they could let market forces shape all of the development issues. Some didn't want government consolidated. They wanted government dismantled, an opinion that horrified guys who wanted government to provide more open space, more parks (including efforts to preserve the county's historic past) and developer funding to replace dollars lost when Proposition 13 passed in 1978."

Interim Planning Director H. George Osborne was appointed EMA's first director on Aug. 7, 1974 – even before EMA had fully taken shape – with the backing of Supervisor Diedrich. Two weeks later, the Board amended the process by which its weekly agendas were created to include the new EMA Director's approval of all items relating to air pollution, building and safety, flood control, harbors, beaches and parks, planning, real property and roads. This resolution also gave Osborne the power to make temporary reassignments of employees.

THE REIGN OF THE SILVER FOX

The *L.A. Times* called Osborne "Orange County government's first bureaucratic superchief. EMA started out with 1,238 employees and a $55 million annual budget." As the *Times* later put it, "The task facing Osborne was immense; Consolidating [multiple] formerly independent departments, each with its own hierarchy, jealousies and distrust of the others. Additionally, Osborne was under a supervisorial mandate to cut costs wherever he could, in an attempt to make the new superagency an economical operation, as well as more responsive to the board of supervisors."[36]
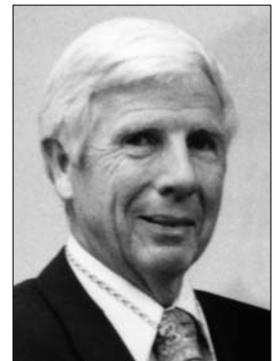
EMA Director H. G. Osborne, circa 1972

An unpublished biography of Osborne (based on interviews with him), stated that "Implementing the EMA organization… involved some modifications of County ordinances, legislation to revise portions of the Orange County Flood Control Act, and the Streets and Highways Code of the State. By mid-1975 the legislative work was completed and the reorganized functions began."[37]

The small Air Pollution department was folded into the regional Air Quality Management District, Solid Waste became part of the new GSA, and the Water Pollution department was superseded by the Santa Ana River Regional Water Quality Control Board. The Orange County Flood District remained a separate entity, but its staff would be EMA employees.

In addition to org charts shifting beneath his feet, Osborne also faced a clash of personality types and philosophies when he brought together numbers-oriented engineers with creative planners. In many cases, Osborne, an engineer himself, put fellow engineers in charge of the various elements of EMA, meaning

the planning types were working directly for engineers. This clash, internally dubbed "the hippies versus the straights," proved to be one of Osborne's greatest challenges. Many employees of the old Planning Department felt he had no appreciation for the planning process and held a deep distrust of him.

The functions of EMA's four divisions were clearly stated in a Nov. 28, 1976 *Los Angeles Times* article:

> ***"The Advance Planning [Division],****... embodies long range land planning (including amendments to the county's ever-evolving general plan), housing development, and the crucial environmental impact assessment department. The division employs... mostly professional planners...*

> ***"The Regulation Division*** *is largely devoted to current planning issues – defined as zoning, building and use permits, subdivision plans and building inspections. The division chief... also serves as the County Planning Commission's chief staff member and handles most current planning presentations to the Board of Supervisors. ...While advance planners deal in future issues and larger, less distinct policy questions, the current planners review current projects to see whether they comply with existing zoning, building regulation and permit policies...*

> ***"The Administration Division****... oversees the agency's budget, personnel allocations and clerical duties...*

> ***"The Development [Division*** *contains] ...a variety of public works responsibilities including flood control, road design, parks design, surveying and subdivision engineering and water quality management. ...Originally, the Development Division also included operation and maintenance of county-owned facilities such as parks and harbors. Earlier this year, however, these public facilities operations were transferred to [the Administration Division's] jurisdiction."*

Tellingly, the four division heads who worked directly under Osborne were designated "assistant directors," until a new EMA Director eventually replaced Osborne and they were redesignated "directors" of their respective divisions.

Ultimately, many concerns about Osborne were quelled. Still, charges lingered for years that too much power had been consolidated in his hands and that he personally expedited development matters of particular interest to Supervisor Diedrich and his associates.[38]

UPS AND DOWNS

Phillip Bettencourt, Executive Director of the Orange County Chapter of the Building Industry Association of Southern California, later called EMA "one of Orange County's major shotgun 'super agency' marriages of the 1970s. Seven different groups of the County's planning and environmental affairs types and the sometimes acerbic and no-nonsense agency engineers were bunched-up into one unit – but hardly under one roof, or even two or three roofs."[39]

View of Moulton Parkway near Aliso Viejo, 1977. "From old El Toro to Dana Point, they have pretty good roads," said former Director of Public Works Carl Nelson, "most of which were built by developers – Not because they wanted to, but because we made them do it." (Photo courtesy Orange County Archives.)

But efforts to find a more effective arrangement of "planning and environmental affairs types" continued. In 1976, the Orange County General Services Agency (GSA) was formed. Public Services was split off

from EMA and incorporated into the new GSA. Real Property Services and Solid Waste Management were transferred to GSA soon thereafter.

Complicated regulations, controversial activities, and a massive merged bureaucracy presented many challenges, and not everyone was happy with the new EMA. And aside from its actual problems, EMA also provided a large, juicy target for scapegoating. Within only a few years of EMA's creation, various politicians, developers and environmental groups were alternately pointing fingers at each other and at EMA. Many land use controversies were ending up in the laps of the Supervisors – a situation they'd hoped to avoid.

At the same time, EMA was doing the work asked of it. The superagency's tended to projects and duties in every corner of the county, but its hand was especially evident in the vast unincorporated areas south of the old Irvine Ranch. That mostly-empty land was being developed at a feverish pace, and EMA took the opportunity to carefully guide the infrastructure, look, and feel of budding communities like Laguna Hills, Lake Forest and Laguna Niguel.

In a November 1976 investigative report on EMA, the *Los Angeles Times* stated that the agency had "fulfilled many of the supervisors' hopes – reducing the number of county employees, improving functional coordination, restraining operating costs and giving the board members stronger control over land use and urban growth policy, environmental controls and massive expenditures on parks, public works and highways." On the downside, the report continued, critics said the story of EMA was a "story of disorganization, low morale, reduced public access to decision making and favoritism toward land developers."[40]

Osborne, who initially stated that it would take about two years from the agency's launch to achieve "efficiency", revised his estimate, tacking on an additional three years to EMA's "shake down" period. And although one of the agency's chief bragging points was efficiency and fewer employees, criticisms of various stripes were often answered with claims that EMA was understaffed.
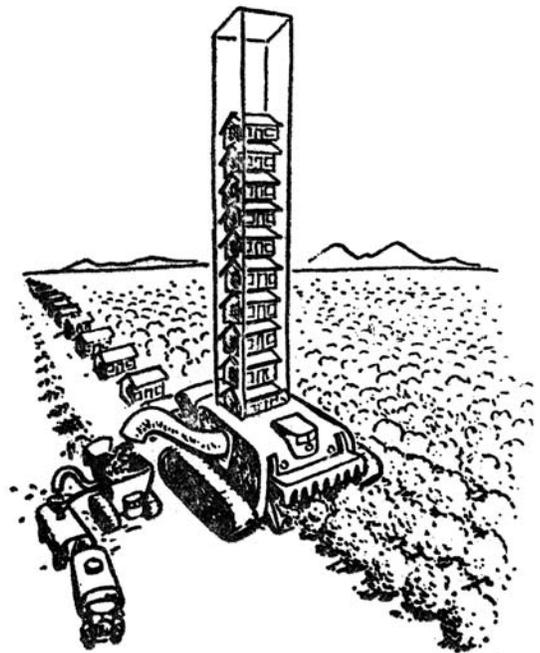
Orange County as seen by Newport Beach cartoonist Virgil Partch in 1974. (From The Daily Pilot, Aug. 24, 1974)

In 1980, Supervisor Harriett Wieder promoted the creation of a blue-ribbon committee (largely made up of land use professionals) to take stock of the EMA. Within six months, the committee crafted a report full of recommendations which were mostly adopted thereafter. These changes included the creation of a new Project Management Division to coordinate all development projects, the restructuring of all planning functions under a single county planning director. Some of the disparate EMA office locations were also physically brought together in the wake of the report, facilitating more cooperation.

But for all the relatively minor changes, EMA's structure remained largely stable over the years. And generally it served the purposes it was intended for. "It [EMA] was a good idea," said outspoken government watchdog Shirley Grindle, who was on the County Planning Commission in the 1970s. "I thought it worked pretty well."[41]

In 1980, eight months after Diedrich's initial sentencing for bribery and conspiracy, Osborne announced that he was retiring to take a lucrative consulting/project management job with housing developer

Warmington Group. However, Osborne remained in the public arena for many years, serving on the Orange County Planning Commission in the late 1980s, as president of the Santa Ana River Flood Protection Agency, and as a board member of the Orange County Water District.[42]

Asked at the end of his tenure at EMA whether the agency's creation had been beneficial, Osborne told the *Register*, "I don't know. We've been in a very rapidly changing environment. Who can predict what would have been the outcome had the status quo been continued?" He also said that EMA might not be up to the challenges of the future, because "Proposition 13 wiped out our forces pretty well. …It's been very difficult to recruit new employees." With less money for salaries, many talented employees were leaving to take better paying jobs with developers. As for his own legacy, Osborne predicted, "I think I'll just fade into the limbo of Orange County history."[43]

TAKING E.M.A. BY STORM

To many, it was no surprise when EMA's Assistant Director of Environmental Regulation, Murray I. Storm was named as Osborne's successor.[44] He'd handled his previous post, managing planning and land use, well for five years and was well regarded in the business and planning communities for his even-handed approach to regulation. He had also held the post of interim EMA director immediately following Osborne's departure.[45] But the engineers who had long held the reins at EMA (and previously in the County Surveyor's office) were startled by the announcement.
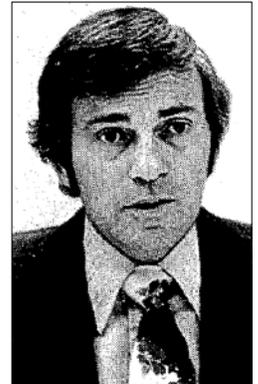

Murray I. Storm

Carl Nelson, then EMA's Assistant Director of Development was one of several who applied to replace Osborne. "All our resumes had been submitted," he remembered. "But instead of a schedule of interviews, there was an announcement that Storm was selected."

Like Osborne, Storm was a civil engineer, but he had experience running a variety of agencies and had a very different personality and "a more participatory" management style.[46] He reorganized EMA to focus more on what he felt were the main issues of concern to Orange County's citizens: housing, transportation, and open space.[47] In some cases, he appointed planners, non-engineers, and new hires from outside the agency to key posts. Some felt Storm was not as immediately responsive to developers as Osborne had been, that he delegated too freely, had difficulty reconciling differences between the divisions of his agency, and lacked the control Osborne once commanded.[48] But many welcomed his more collaborative management style. By 1981, EMA had an annual budget of $131.5 million and more than 1,000 full-time employees and was still growing in its size and responsibilities.

In Aug. 1986, Storm resigned, saying that in recent months he had "come cross-wise with our CAO." Indeed, the new CAO, Larry Parrish, felt that EMA operated too independently and didn't do enough to keep his office or the Board of Supervisors appraised of its actions.[49]

Storm was replaced with 39-year-old Ernie Schneider – a former EMA employee, fitness fanatic, chief aide to Supervisor Bruce Nestande, and former protégé of Osborne – who bested four older rivals for the position of EMA Director.[50] The Board felt Schneider offered a strong, hands-on approach reminiscent of Osborne. Former colleague Daniel T. Miller later described Schneider's "tireless work ethic" to the *Times*: "This was not a guy who screwed around,… The public sector was his life and he was always driving for the top position." Schneider often began his day at 7:00 a.m.[51]
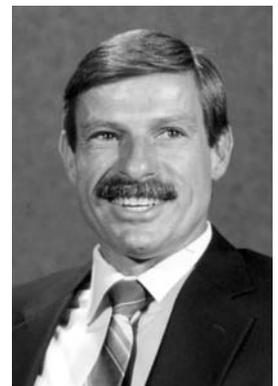
Ernie Schneider, 1986.

As he took the reins, Schneider's key areas of focus were traffic congestion, new freeways, housing and recreation areas, and finding acceptable locations for new jails and landfills. "The easy things have all been done" at EMA, he told the *Times*, and "all that's left [are] the hard jobs."[52]

In 1987, a sixth division was added to EMA, responsible for transportation planning – specifically to solve some of the county's traffic problems.[53] The other five divisions at that point were public works, regulation, parks and recreation, administration, and planning. Although the O.C. Transportation Authority and the Transportation Corridor Agencies took over parts of county road planning around 1988, the overall trend at EMA was still toward agency growth. This was in contrast to the mid-1980s national trend of breaking up superagencies. There was a growing belief that the "eggs in one basket" approach was often too expensive, requiring additional layers of management to oversee various subagencies and programs.[54]

Before those trends could catch up with Orange County, Ernie Schneider succeeded in his "drive for the top" and left EMA to become County CAO in 1989. Part of his pitch during interviews was an expansive plan to streamline and restructure county government.

CAUGHT IN THE BANKRUPTCY UNDERTOW

In December 1989, Michael M. Ruane was selected to replace Schneider. Ruane had worked at EMA for nine years. He has been head of the Planning Division for a year when, at age 32, he became the youngest person ever to lead an agency at the County of Orange.[55]

Front page of the Dec. 7, 1994 Orange County Edition of the Los Angeles Times.

As more and more county territory was absorbed into incorporated cities, and as the pace of new construction slowed, the Board of Supervisors -- and particularly Supervisor Roger Stanton – wondered why EMA wasn't shrinking in response to its smaller workload. In 1991, Ruane launched an audit of the agency's staffing needs and expenses, which led to a reduction in force of at least 114 the following year, and plans to eliminate 340 more by 1997. Some of this downsizing was accomplished by handing over responsibility for services like road repair and landscaping to cities and by eliminating little-utilized functions such as the county Fish & Game Commission. More cuts would be made by privatizing some functions, including contracting out grounds keeping at county parks.[56]

In the early 1990s, EMA moved to 300 N. Flower in Santa Ana and had the Agricultural Commissioner Department added to its ranks.[57] In 1993, the Housing Department (a.k.a. Housing Authority) was also moved to EMA and combined with Housing & Community Development. Little did they know, it was all just a matter of shuffling deck chairs on a sinking ship. In 1994, the County of Orange filed for bankruptcy protection. Almost immediately, EMA – like nearly every other county agency – found its budget in the crosshairs.

As the County reeled and rebuilt in the wake of the bankruptcy, there were calls to restructure much of county government, including the EMA and the GSA. In 1995, Supervisor Roger Stanton got a lot of traction (and publicity) with his proposal to give EMA's duties to a consortium of private companies. Stanton argued the privatization of the superagency would save money, eliminate county
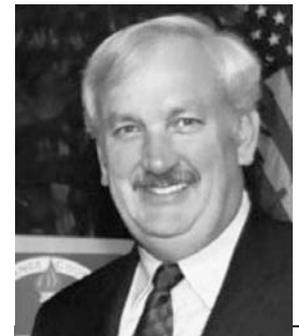
Michael Ruane, ca 2013

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employees, and provide a model for the future privatization of other county agencies.[58] Ultimately, the panel evaluating bids to take over EMA issued a report saying that the agency's unique combination of functions probably made privatization unwieldy if not unworkable.[59] The plan was quietly dropped.

Still, as the county's bankruptcy recovery plan took shape, it was clear that EMA would bear a good deal of the burden of "cost recovery." The Redevelopment, Flood Control, and Harbors, Beaches & Parks divisions were each slated to lose about $80 million over the life of the plan, and Ruane sent out a letter telling his employees to expect layoffs soon. Immediately nixed EMA projects included road development in the Newport Coast and Laguna Canyon areas, a variety of park maintenance efforts, and planned interpretive centers at Harriett M. Wieder Regional Park and Thomas F. Riley Wilderness Park. The possibility of bringing more advertising, concessions, weddings and special events to parks was also discussed. Cuts to flood control projects raised concerns about the County's liability in future disasters.[60]

THE END OF E.M.A.

Schneider was fired as County CAO after the bankruptcy – a blow from which friends say he never fully recovered. In 1996, the Board of Supervisors passed an ordinance adopting a new CEO model of organization for the county, and filled the position with John Wayne Airport director Jan Mittermeier. She reviewed the wide array of functions overseen by the EMA and said she was "unable to identify either synergies or cost savings associated with combining such diverse services."[61] She soon presented a set of recommendations for restructuring county government, which included the elimination of GSA and EMA. These two agencies would become indirect victims of the bankruptcy as officials attempted to save money through staff reductions.[62]

The Board of Supervisors gave preliminary approval in June 1996. Ruane left his post as EMA director that same month to become Deputy CEO for strategic affairs.

The board gave final approval to the reorganization plan in November 1996. Although the vote was 4 to 0, there seemed to be some uncertainty on the part of the beleaguered board. Supervisor William Steiner told the *Orange County Register*, "The jury's not in as to whether this is the right way to go, but we're going a direction."

In 1997, the planning and regulation divisions were removed from EMA to become the Planning and Development Services Department (PDSD). The other EMA functions were combined with the public works functions of old GSA to create a new Public Facilities and Resources Department (PFRD).[63] (Many – sometimes even supervisors – pronounced the acronym "pee effin' are dee.") In short, EMA and GSA were deconstructed and remixed to form a number of new smaller departments. Those which included former EMA functions were:

PFRD (Public Facilities and Resources Department)
- Road
- Flood
- Harbors, Beaches and Parks
- Geomatics (Survey)
- Engineering & Permit Services
- Internal Services (added a couple years later)
- Agricultural Commissioner
- Administration
- Watershed (added a couple years later in response to new stormwater legislation)

PDSD (Planning and Development Services Department)
- Planning
- Building and Safety

Housing Department

During the overall restructuring of County government under Mittermeier, at least 220 jobs were eliminated (largely through enhanced "golden parachute" retirement benefits) and budgets were cut.[64] She called the reorganization a "flattening," meaning the removal of unnecessary layers of bureaucracy.[65]

And so it was that EMA and GMA, two super-agencies nominally created to increase efficiency and save money, were shuttered for the same two reasons.

ALWAYS IN MOTION IS THE FUTURE

In 2004, the deck was reshuffled yet again, and the Resources and Development Management Department (RDMD) was formed by merging PFRD and PDSD.

In 2008, shortly after the teenage soap opera "The OC" (set in Newport Beach) went off the air, County agencies began changing their names to include "OC." The Integrated Waste Management Department became OC Landfills, the Dana Point Harbor Department became OC Dana Point Harbor, RDMD became OC Public Works, and the redubbed OC Parks moved their offices to the old Irvine Co. agricultural headquarters and became part of OC Community Resources.[66] After the 2008 reorganization, OC Public Works divisions, with their new names, included[67]:

OC Engineering
- OC Roads
- OC Flood Control
- OC Construction
- OC Geomatics and Land Information Systems (Survey)
- Operations and Maintenance

OC Planned Communities

OC Planning
- OC Planning and Development Services
- OC Agricultural Commissioner (& Sealer of Weights and Measures)
- OC Watersheds

OC Facilities
- A/E Project Management
- Real Estate and Asset Management
- Facilities Operations
- Standards and Compliance
- Transportation

OC Administration
- Accounting Services

- Purchasing and Contract Services
- Information Services
- Finance and Department Services
- Human Resources
- Special Services

Even as this history was written, in 2014, OC Public Works – embodying the largest remaining portion of the old EMA – underwent yet another restructuring under its new director, Shane L. Silsby. Early drafts of a new org chart show the organization mainly grouped into two branches. The first includes OC Fleet Services, OC Planning, Administrative Services, OC Facilities Design & construction, and OC Facilities O&M/CUF. The second branch, called OC Engineering, includes OC Infrastructure Programs, OC Operations & Maintenance, OC Survey, OC Construction, and OC Watersheds/Agricultural Commissioner.[68]

It seems the task of combining, separating, and reshuffling functions within local government has no beginning and no end. Each era has its own practical and political demands, and government agencies – whatever name they may use – must constantly change to meet those needs. During EMA's 23-year lifespan, Orange County's population had grown from 1,684,464 to 2,773,450 residents, along with their accompanying needs for services and infrastructure.

Despite the peculiarities of its birth and dissolution, the Environmental Management Agency was ultimately successful in meeting the needs of the public and government during a period of breathtaking growth and change in Orange County. Its influence touched every corner of the county. But clearly, the southern part of the county – the large unincorporated area mainly developed during the agency's tenure – remains one of the clearest and best examples of EMA's planning, engineering, and attention to detail.

"The Environmental Management Agency was an important step in the continuing evolution of county government," said former Director of Public Works Carl Nelson. "It was successful in overseeing the conversion of undeveloped South County to an urban community, which has now matured with the incorporation of new cities. I think those of us who worked for EMA are all pretty proud of what we accomplished."[69]

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