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8/22/2011
Superior Court of California
County of Tuolumne
BY Thay Cooper
Clerk

August 19, 2011

Honorable Eleanor Provost, Judge
Superior Court of California
County of Tuolumne
60 N. Washington
Sonora, CA. 95370

RE: 2010- 2011 Grand Jury Report

Dear Judge Provost,

The Strawberry Fire Protection District (SFPD) Board of Directors has reviewed the 2010-2011 Grand Jury report and has previously responded to the required sections dealing with special districts. Even though we are not required to respond to the Community Development/Regulatory Committee section dealing with the future of fire service in Tuolumne County, as an all volunteer fire department, we feel that is in our residents' best interest to bring to your attention our thoughts, concerns and questions.

R1: The Grand Jury finds that Tuolumne County should consolidate all existing fire districts and departments under a single management system to provide structural fire protection on a year-round basis.

(a) A single Fire Chief providing leadership to all responding districts should be considered. The districts would employ Fire Captains and Lieutenants as needed. By whatever method, it is critical that fire command structure is centralized for all responders County-wide. This might be accomplished under the "Single County-Wide Fire System – Joint Powers Agreement Option" discussed in the Tuolumne County Fire and First Responder Study. Use of part-time firefighters should be explored to meet staffing demand in all districts/departments. This usually results in cost savings by reducing benefit packages.

The recommendation of having only one fire chief to handle the entire county is a cost saving recommendation. However, is that savings worth the loss of experience in the field? Tuolumne County is a geologically diverse county. A commanding officer must be able to handle urban, rural and wild land fires. Not to mention the requirement to be a medical first responder too. However, this report deals with fire service so we will stay within those guidelines. Will the dollar amount of the costs savings actually save money if the county has to hire more Captains and Lieutenants and increase the salary/benefit package of the one chief overseeing the entire county? There may also be an increase in contract costs with Cal-Fire if they are asked to do more for the county under a JPA agreement.

The recommendation to hire part time firefighters as a cost savings does not solve the retention problem we are currently experiencing within the fire fighting industry. How can a county recruit individuals, expect them to complete intense academy fire training

geared to a career, only to be hired on part time without benefits? A part time employee will most likely look elsewhere for full time employment or have to take on a second job in order to supplement their income. This results in reduced availability of that firefighter.

As stated in the facts portion of the Grand Jury's report, medical calls account for 71% of the first responder calls within Tuolumne County. Is it really fire services that need to be consolidated or does this county need to take a look at consolidating medical services and using a two-tiered system for emergency response?

(b) Training should be standardized and every effort should be made to make it accessible to volunteers. Anyone from outside Tuolumne County that benefits from the consolidated Training Bureau's courses should pay a reasonable fee for that training.

We are in agreement with the Grand Jury that every effort should be made to make training available for volunteers. However, it is not just the availability of training that is the problem. Further concerns with the training requirements will be addressed under R5.

(c) An inventory of resources should be completed that includes what/who belongs to, or is provided by, CAL Fire and must include:

- *Services and equipment Tuolumne County is enjoying without cost through its contract with CAL Fire*
- *What/who does Tuolumne County Fire Department own and supply*
- *What/who does each district/department own and could possibly supply to a coordinated County-wide system*

This comprehensive and accurate list of assets, including personnel, is crucial in determining how to save money. (The Commission on Fire Accreditation International recommends a system approach known as "Standard of Response Coverage" for use in self-assessment of a fire agency. {City-gate Assoc. Fire Department Evaluation for the Groveland Community Services District} This approach might be useful for the current evaluation of Tuolumne County fire and emergency response services.)

The SFPD is not really in a position to comment in this area however we agree that a complete inventory of County owned equipment should be completed. The task of inventorying all equipment in all fire districts should identify those districts lacking adequate or outdated resources. It should also serve to identify districts that have excess equipment or equipment that is no longer needed/used and may distributed elsewhere. We also agree that all Cal-Fire owned equipment being utilized by Tuolumne County Fire should be identified. The Cal-Fire contract is a substantial cost to Tuolumne County. Under the Grand Jury's own admission the cost of the Cal-Fire contract will probably increase within the next year. The Grand Jury report indicates that Tuolumne County may be enjoying some services and equipment without cost. However, aren't Cal-Fire services and use of equipment taken into consideration when negotiating this contract?

(d) Set aside parochial attitudes and address economic reality by:

- *using available dollars wisely through coordinated purchasing of supplies and equipment*
- *sharing maintenance of, and training personnel to use, all available equipment*
- *avoid unnecessary duplication of resources*
- *standardize and coordinate training of volunteers*
- *encourage volunteers to be County-wide responders*
- *share educational and public relations efforts*

Anytime money can be saved by consolidating the ordering of equipment and supplies it should be done. Strawberry recently purchased new equipment and used vendors that have been doing business with Tuolumne County Fire in the past. This saved us time since these vendors were already familiar in dealing with the local departments. Also, local businesses should be used whenever possible to save on shipping costs. SFPD found that we may have been able to acquire a piece of equipment from a company on the east coast cheaper, but when shipping costs were added in the cost exceeded the local vendor. Replenishing supplies that are used frequently may produce some cost savings when bought in bulk for the entire county, but this should be explored before assuming it to be true. Again, we would cite the diversity of the county as to what types of supplies are utilized by each station.

Also, under a JPA system who/what would determine which department/district's needs are more important than another. If there is only one pot of money, who decides what equipment is purchased and where that equipment will be housed and used? Where there are shortages of funds which department goes without?

We agree that duplication of resources should be avoided whenever possible. Part of this issue seems to be a dispatching problem and needs to be addressed at that level. Extra resources being on scene of an incident became more of a problem when the fire and medical responder programs were merged together. Under the first responder's program, fire trucks are now dispatched for medical emergencies along with EMT and ambulance services. Perhaps the purchase and use of smaller squads, type III or IV engines, would reduce the wear and tear on more expensive equipment and increase the life of the larger type I engines.

Standardization of training of volunteers is a good idea. As we stated previously, further concerns with training requirements will be addressed under R5.

R4: The cooperative effort demonstrated by participation in the Tuolumne County Fire and First Responder Study is a good foundation for organizing and launching an educational public outreach program. The purpose of this program would be to explain what fire departments are expected to do today, how those demands have affected costs, the viability of volunteer-only stations, and the ongoing need for volunteers. Most importantly, the program should explain why change is necessary. That explanation

would benefit from a clear presentation of how demand-for-service expectations relate to what the community can afford to provide. Once people understand that the level of service they expect cannot be provided with existing dollars, they will be more likely to support change.

Public education with regard to fire services and their costs is necessary throughout the County. Public perception is that of wasted tax dollars. In part this is due to lack of information. The County's effort in completing the Fire and First Responder Study 2011 did not involve the public. Meetings were held with fire chiefs from county stations/districts, ambulance services and Cal-Fire. Strawberry Fire Protection District had representation, but Pinecrest and Jamestown did not. The biggest absence at those meetings was the taxpayer. How did only 4 options get chosen for review? Was a taxpayer option ever considered? From our perspective, the fire chiefs and Cal Fire decided on the best option without any input from the public. One of the options discussed during the FFRS Study Group was maintaining the status quo. However, the status quo was only discussed using current training requirements, current staffing levels and current funding levels to determine what type of service could be provided in the future. Wouldn't the best way to educate the public on what the current level of services are, the shortages in funding/resources and how to resolve those issues and improve services, have been to have had their participation in those meetings? At the very least, updates should have been provided to the public throughout the process.

R5: (a) Required training of volunteers should be made as accessible, affordable and flexible as possible. Volunteers should be encouraged to serve County-wide whenever possible. Opportunity to engage in actual fire fighting should be expanded. Any professional firefighter that in any way discourages or disparages the contribution of volunteers should be disciplined. Leadership at all levels should reaffirm the importance of volunteers to the success of fire departments.

Availability and accessibility of training for volunteers is an issue that desperately needs to be addressed. The current Joint Basic Training Academy is geared to a career path for firefighters. The demands of the academy are too great to attract volunteers. Most volunteers have full time jobs and families. To expect them to attend over 400 hours of training in a five month period is not feasible. The academy requires attendance 3 nights a week from 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. and most weekends. There should be a separate academy/training just for volunteers. The Office of the State Fire Marshall has endorsed a training plan for volunteers that requires only 40 hours of classroom time. The recruit then spends the next year continuing their training with a paid station. Tuolumne County, because of their association with Cal-Fire in the training academy will not accept this type of training arrangement. This is a major factor in the loss of volunteers. Strawberry has recently acquired 2 new volunteers. One has completed academy and the second will start next year. The 2 volunteers train with the Pinecrest firefighters every week. Even though only one has completed academy, the second volunteer is just as capable of responding to incidents. The training that they both continue to receive at the Pinecrest station has enabled them to respond and be used *up to their abilities* to both medical and fire emergencies. As a side note, even though our one volunteer was able to complete the

training academy it did not come without some tough times – mostly financial hardships as she was not able to work and attend academy at the same time due to the demands of attending required training classes/exercises and studying for tests.

Encouraging volunteers to be County wide responders is a great idea but may not be feasible. Tuolumne County is spread out. Response time for volunteers outside their district would be prohibitive. Most volunteer stations do not have the ability to house firefighters and they would therefore be responding from their home districts.

Strawberry Fire and Pinecrest Fire have managed to work through any differences that may have existed between them in the past. This happened through mutual training and we continue to enjoy a good working relationship.

(b) Local businesses and organizations should be approached to sponsor volunteers with stipends or “scholarships” to help fund training, equipment and perhaps even child care during training sessions. At the very least, employers should be educated on why their cooperation is critical to volunteers they employ.

Local businesses and organizations should not only sponsor volunteers with stipends and scholarships, but should support them on a continuing basis. If an employee is a volunteer firefighter they should be allowed to leave their employment when an incident requires their response without the fear of losing their jobs. Employers should be reminded of the responsibility they have to the community that supports them.

It is also important to have community support. SFPD found it not only necessary to reimburse our recruits for training and travel expenses but to provide free child care as well. This is a common issue for young or single parent families. This type of support is not only needed during training but ongoing as well. When the call comes in the middle of the night, who watches the children?

(c) Centralization of volunteer programs under a single leader would improve the potential of gaining new recruits, make training consistent, provide expanded opportunity to participate in responses, and insure better retention of recruits. The program should make use of every good idea available from successful efforts throughout the County and elsewhere. In addition, this program might serve as a public-relations and education coordinator.

Consolidation of volunteer training is a good idea and could be accomplished by following the Office of State Fire Marshal’s endorsed training program as explained in (a) above. The biggest road block for recruitment of volunteers is the time constraints and financial hardships for a person who has a full time job and is not looking for a career in firefighting. Most volunteers just want to be able to help out their community whenever possible. Reducing the training academy requirements and allowing volunteers to remain trainee recruits while still training and responding with a paid station would benefit the volunteer program.

If a centralized system is used, the same effort that is used for recruiting in larger populated areas must also be used in rural areas and small mountain communities.

R6: All Tuolumne County responders should cooperate in a strategy to improve ISO ratings. Maintaining the existing ratings must be a priority. Water service suppliers are a vital part of this effort, their participation should be requested. Volunteer stations should be reopened as soon as possible.

ISO ratings are a difficult thing to address. The Grand Jury is correct when stating that maintaining current ratings must be a priority. They are also correct in saying that water delivery systems play a big role in ISO ratings. It is therefore imperative that all of the varied water companies are aware of this and receive the support needed from all County, State and Federal agencies in order to fix and maintain their systems.

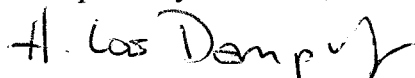
It should also be noted that the location of fire departments is a determining factor for ISO ratings. In North Monterey County, it has been determined that anyone living outside a 5 mile radius of a fire department will have an ISO rating of 10. If insurance companies use that type of rule in Tuolumne County it would be impossible for most residents to obtain insurance.

SFPD has worked diligently during the last year to rebuild our fire department with the goal of reopening with trained volunteer firefighters. We have always been a fire fighting department and have never had the responsibility of medical services. That has helped tremendously in getting new volunteers. We have consistently heard from potential recruits who want to either do fire or medical response but not both. We currently have an agreement with Pinecrest Fire for mutual aid services. Our volunteers train and work alongside the Pinecrest volunteers. This arrangement is working well for both districts. The SFPD has also used this past year to upgrade our equipment both personal and for the trucks. The trucks are currently being checked by a certified emergency vehicle mechanic and should be operational within the next couple of months. At that time we plan to reopen our fire department.

In conclusion it should be stated that the SFPD is in no way trying to jeopardize the safety of firefighters by reducing the type of training required by State and Federal regulations. It is only the length of time allowed for training that is prohibitive. The combination of volunteer training with the career firefighter training has effectively eliminated most potential volunteer recruits. A separate volunteer program makes more sense.

The SFPD would like to thank you for your time. If you have any questions please contact H. Lee Dempsey, Board President, at 209-965-4146.

Respectfully submitted,



H. Lee Dempsey