



Groveland Fire Department

18930 Highway 120 ▪ P.O. Box 350, Groveland, CA 95321

Phone 209-962-7891 ▪ Fax 209-962-4780

swarner@gcsd.org ▪ www.grovelandfire.com

August 18, 2011

Honorable Eric L. Du Temple
Presiding Judge of the Superior Court
County of Tuolumne
60 North Washington Street
Sonora, CA 95370

EP
8/25/11

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FILED
AUG 22 2011
Superior Court of California
County of Tuolumne
BY *Jayne Barnes*
Clerk

Re: Response to the 2010-11 Tuolumne County Grand Jury Report Findings and Recommendations as they relate to Fire Safety in Tuolumne County

Dear Judge Du Temple,

We have been asked to comment on the recommendations listed on page 89 of the 2010-2011 Grand Jury Report, pursuant to Penal Code 933 and 933.5 that may have an effect on the Groveland Community Services District Fire Department. Therefore, we have not made detailed comments regarding findings but rather have addressed specific recommendations in significant detail in order to provide more helpful overall responses:

We substantially agree, as they relate to Fire Safety in Tuolumne County, with Findings F1(b), F2, F3, F4, F5, F6 and especially F8. We believe that Findings F1(c), (d), and (e), F7 and F9 need further analysis. We disagree with Finding F1(a), and therefore Recommendation R1(a). We would refer the Grand Jury to Finding F8 and our responses to the Recommendations below as our basis for disagreement with this specific finding.

Before we address the report, we would like to provide a little background on the southern part of Tuolumne County. We have provided fire protection and emergency medical response for virtually all emergencies within the Groveland Community Service District boundaries, as well as outside the District, because of auto and mutual aid agreements with Tuolumne County Fire and Mariposa County Fire Departments. This has been challenging with the state of the current economy and current budgets. The large volume of out of district calls will be addressed at a future meeting with the county.

The Groveland Fire Department is dedicated to excellent service as we safeguard the lives and properties in our community. We provide emergency fire and medical response, rescue, fire prevention, and public education. We are committed to continuing education and training for our staff, volunteers and reserve firefighters.



While the Groveland Fire Department does not currently agree with the recommendation to consolidate all existing fire districts and departments under a single management system to provide structural fire protection on a year round basis or recommendation 1(a) specifically, we do agree with the spirit of most of the Grand Jury recommendations. As a part of the Tuolumne County Fire and First Responder working group that meets monthly, the Groveland Fire Department is reviewing and working on many issues that would have an impact on Fire Safety in Tuolumne County, including the subject of consolidation. It is really premature to comment on this subject further at this time. We have responded to the Grand Jury Report by addressing the recommended actions listed on page 89.

Recommendation 1(d), Recommended Action 3

Some of the bullet points identified in the Grand Jury Report are currently being worked on at the Tuolumne County Fire Chief level. At the last Fire Chief's meeting, the subject of utilizing volunteers county-wide was discussed. This is currently being done within the fire districts and the City of Sonora by having multiple volunteers, reserve firefighters, scholarships or interns working for different agencies within the county. Utilizing volunteers county-wide comes at a high cost for all of the agencies because of the cost to outfit these personnel with proper protective gear. Discussion has continued for several years about building a recruitment program through Columbia College that would enhance the current firefighting efforts by local agencies by utilizing their Emergency Medical and Fire Science classes. This program would help recruit college students for Columbia College as well as being a feeder program into the local fire programs. Other useful programs are the ROP fire science programs at the local high schools. Summerville High School had a successful program in prior years but it is no longer active. Sonora High School has implemented an ROP Wildland program that will begin this fall.

Tioga High School in Groveland has had a ROP Fire Science program in place for about seven years which has funneled volunteers into the Groveland Fire Department. Graduates from this program have also joined CAL Fire and the United States Forest Service as seasonal personnel.

Recommendation 4, Recommended Action 3

Through the cooperative efforts of CAL Fire, Tuolumne County Fire Department, local fire districts, and the City of Sonora, we can continually provide public awareness through fire prevention efforts. This would be a good start because all fire agencies work with the county on a routine basis. Tasking one of the county fire prevention personnel as a Public Information Officer would also be a positive step to get people thinking about the ongoing need for volunteers and paid firefighters. Informing the public on the demands on the fire service today, the challenges that lie ahead, and the reasonable expectations that local communities could have for their local services, would educate the public throughout the county on how vitally important these services are and how they cannot be provided by the existing dollars. Again, the fire districts and the City of Sonora will rely on their fire chief to be the public information officer for their jurisdiction. A captain from each agency could be assigned as an outreach officer to educate the public on what services each fire department provides.

The City of Sonora and local fire districts have had challenges educating the public about the need for special taxes and benefit assessments within their jurisdictions. This was recently discussed at the Tuolumne County Fire Chiefs' meeting. Based on discussions at these meetings, it is likely that a program will be developed to address volunteer recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters.

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Through the FEMA grant process there is an Assistance to Firefighters Grant that provides funding for fire department recruitment and retention to develop programs. This grant could be pursued as a regional grant to include all county fire agencies.

Recommendation 5(a), Recommended Action 3

The subject of accessible, affordable, and flexible volunteer training has been discussed in recent Tuolumne County Chiefs' meetings. In the current economy, the demands for service and training requirements have multiplied driving the fire service in Tuolumne County to employ full-time and part-time firefighters. This is mainly due to increased call volume and the demand for full time personnel in rural communities plus volunteer training requirements, people needing to work two and three jobs, time commitment with raising families, and increased age limits making it difficult to recruit volunteers in retirement communities. Volunteer firefighters are the backbone of every department within the county. Every department within Tuolumne County understands the need for volunteers, but the increasing number of hours to complete the volunteer academy and remain current on mandated training on a monthly and yearly basis has made it difficult to recruit and retain volunteer firefighters.

One way to address this training issue would be through individual self-paced task books that are assigned to each volunteer which indicates training requirements for the year. This would go hand in hand with company trainings and night drills to meet the minimum standards for all fire personnel. Fire departments would need to agree on a Volunteer MOU, so that volunteers could provide a service county-wide thereby cutting costs for all agencies. This concept needs further exploration through the County fire department and Fire Chiefs because currently fire districts are utilizing volunteers from other departments, but the county fire system only allows county volunteers to operate county equipment.

Recommendation 5(c), Recommended Action 3

The Tuolumne County Fire Chiefs and Training Officers' Association have established the Joint Basic Fire Academy. All fire agencies in the county participate and utilize this yearly training Academy for volunteer recruits. When a volunteer graduates from the Academy they are trained to the current minimum standards of Firefighter 1 which is recognized state-wide. To complete their firefighter certification they work up to one year as a volunteer, or six months as a paid firefighter, to receive the State Fire Marshall Firefighter 1 certification.

The entire Columbia College fire program could be used to build a county-wide program for recruitment and retention of volunteer firefighters. With the number of young people currently attending the college there is a great opportunity for students to get experience and build a resume. This will also benefit all fire agencies in the county by utilizing college students as volunteers and part-time employees.

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Recommendation 6, Recommended Action 3

Insurance Service Office (ISO) has evaluated every fire agency in the county and tries to target an evaluation of a fire department every fifteen years. This could happen earlier if a fire agency has improved its service to the community and is trying to receive credit for it and achieve a better rating. This could also work against a fire agency if its level of service has been compromised due to budget constraints or other factors.

When ISO evaluates a fire department it looks for written agreements between agencies that are addressing auto and mutual aid response with surrounding fire departments. This is important to ISO because signed agreements are entered into the Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) and therefore are followed during dispatching for emergency incidents.

Reopening volunteer stations and having auto or mutual aid agreements would help the ISO rating for the county, special districts, and the City of Sonora. Tuolumne County was just evaluated and is awaiting the results of ISO's recent visit. Also important in the ISO rating is the local community water system, which typically comprises 40 percent of the total ISO rating points. Local water agencies should pursue state and federal grants to address aging water infrastructure issues.

Sincerely,

Shane Warner
Fire Chief
Groveland Fire Department

Gary J. Mello, R.C.E.
General Manager and District Engineer
Groveland Community Services District

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