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**BACKGROUND STUDY  
MICRO REPORT:  
REORGANIZATION OF STRUCTURAL FIRE PROTECTION  
AND EMERGENCY MEDICAL SERVICES  
IN UNINCORPORATED SAN DIEGO COUNTY  
(PHASE I)**

*SAN DIEGO LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSION*

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## **GOVERNANCE**

The original direction for the completion of this background report on governance was based on the reorganization and district formation proposals initiated by LAFCO and the Board of Supervisors, respectively. The proposals involved uniting seven fire protection districts; six county service areas; and the emergency service functions of four municipal water districts into a regional fire protection district (FPD). Operations of seven volunteer fire departments would be folded into the regional agency and unincorporated areas, which currently are not within the boundary of a structural fire protection organization, would come under the jurisdiction of the regional FPD. Towards the end of the LAFCO staff and consultant review of these proposals, the scope of the review was expanded to reflect an emerging county program that has enhanced the provision of fire protection services in select unincorporated areas. This county program has resulted in the infusion of over \$8 million of additional funds to support fire protection in unincorporated territory.

One of the crucial elements of creating any regional fire protection system is determining how it will be governed. For example, will the new system be governed by an appointed or elected board? If elected, should board members be selected at large or by division? How many members should make up the board? Should there be advisory committees? What name should be given to the new entity?

The purpose of this section of the background report is to address these and other issues, and provide conclusions for overall governance of a regional fire protection entity. The goal is to provide a suggested path that can be followed to create the best environment for the entity to be successful, for it to provide the best fire protection and emergency medical services possible within available financial resources.

On April 19, 2005, the San Diego County Board of Supervisors initiated a partnership with LAFCO and requested that the Commission study the reorganization of fire protection services in the County. Based on the information and conditions at the time, the Board of Supervisors gave some initial direction for the structure of the new entity. First, the focus of the Board's request was to explore the feasibility of creating a regional fire agency, and not a county fire department per se, as found in Riverside and San Bernardino Counties, or a joint powers authority, which is used in Orange County. Second, the name for the entity was stated as the San Diego Regional Fire Protection District (RFPD). Third, the Board of Supervisors stipulated that the governing board of the new entity should be reflective of the population in the County, with the final number of board members determined by LAFCO.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

After examining various governance options based on pertinent sections of the State Health and Safety and Government Codes, and as explained in more detail in the following paragraphs, the following conclusions have been reached.

1. The new regional fire organization should consist of an elected board, reflective of the diverse population, geography, and emergency service needs of the County.
2. If an independent regional fire protection district is formed, the initial board should be elected at large as specified by state law; shortly after being elected, the new board should call an election to ask the voters to authorize electing the board members by division or district,
3. Advisory committees, representing distinct geographic areas of the District, should be created to assist any of the alternative fire organizations examined in this background report.

## **SIZE OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

### ***Regional Fire Protection District***

The State Health and Safety Code Section 13842 provides that, unless the Board of Supervisors appoints itself as the district board, “a district board may have three, five, seven, nine or eleven members.”

In deciding the size of the regional protection district board, the goal is to have a board large enough so that it is representative of the area served, has a diversity of thought and input, but is not too large that it becomes cumbersome in its deliberations. While an 11-member board, which is the largest permitted by state law, is somewhat larger than most local district deliberative bodies (which usually number five or seven), it is the number suggested in this background report for the RFPD board. This is in large part due to the geographical size of the proposed regional fire district. From the north it ranges from De Luz and the Riverside County boundary at Sunshine Summit to the Mexican border in the south. This is a diverse area, ranging from suburban to rural land uses, desert to mountain topography and geography, with a wide variety of entities providing fire suppression and emergency medical services to this area.

Given the fact that there are over 100 policy makers on the boards of directors or advisory boards on the fire protection districts, municipal water districts, community service areas and volunteer fire departments that would be folded into the RFPD, efforts need to be exerted to provide broad representation on the district board. Under State law, as stated previously, the largest possible board membership is 11, which is what is suggested by this Report.

### ***County of San Diego (Successor to Dissolved Fire Agencies)***

The governance implications associated with the designation of the County of San Diego as the successor to the agencies proposed to be dissolved as part of the LAFCO reorganization proposal (phase 1) was evaluated in this background report. Regardless of whether county staff would directly administer the new fire program, or if responsibilities would be transferred to a county-dependent special district, such as a County Service Area (CSA), it is important that the governing board of the new entity be elected and accountable to the public. Under any of the alternatives that would place successor agency responsibilities with county government, the current structure and electoral

process for selection of members of the five members of the Board of Supervisors would be consistent with the need to have an elected board that is responsible for emergency services. The Board of Supervisors in San Diego County are elected by division and would be capable of providing adequate representation over the diverse interests, population, and emergency service needs in the County.

## **ELECTED VS. APPOINTED BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

### ***Regional Fire Protection District***

The State Health and Safety Code Section 13835 provides that, if a fire protection district “contains only unincorporated territory in a single county, the district board may be elected or may be appointed by the county board of supervisors which may appoint itself as the district board.” Section 13844 further provides that not only may a Board of Supervisors appoint itself as the district board, it “may delegate any or all of its powers to a fire commission composed of five or seven members.” These fire commissioners can serve at the supervisors’ pleasure or for four year staggered terms.

These sections, therefore, provide that a district board, such as the one that could be established to govern the RFPD, can be: (1) elected; (2) appointed by the board of supervisors; (3) the board of supervisors appointing itself as the RFPD Board; or (4) a fire commission appointed by the board of supervisors if the board decides that a fire commission would be in the best interest of the district, and initially appoints itself as the RFPD board of directors.

Establishing a board by election is the preferred alternative recommended by this report. One advantage of creating an elected board is that it is representative of the area being served since directors must stand for election and be elected by the voters in the district. Also, a board of directors is likely to be responsive to those living in the proposed RFPD, again because the directors are subject to the electoral process. Further, an elected 11-member board provides more opportunities for representation on the RFPD Board than options 3 and 4 listed in the previous paragraph in which the district board would be limited to 5 or 7 members.

Finally, individual interviews with representatives of the Phase I fire entities indicates support for an elected 11-member RFPD Board. The support and especially the cooperation of Phase I entities is important in order to successfully establish the proposed district.

### ***County of San Diego (Successor to Dissolved Fire Agencies)***

As previously discussed, the Board of Supervisors is currently elected by the citizens of the entire county. The Board is representative of the area served. Accordingly, a discussion of an appointed board is not applicable to this jurisdictional option and is not addressed in detail in this background report.

## **ELECTED AT LARGE OR BY DISTRICT**

### ***Regional Fire Protection District***

Since the creation of a regional FPD will need to be approved by a vote of the electorate of the proposed district, it makes sense to have the initial election of the proposed 11-member district board occur at the same time. State law requires that the initial board be elected at large. Because of the size of the board and the size and diversity of the district's topography and geography, and the needs and demands of the area to be served, the initial board should probably seek input from the public whether the 11-member board should be elected by division in the future.

After the initial board of trustees is elected, Section 13846 of the Health and Safety Code provides "that in the case of an elected district board, the directors may be elected by division (districts) if a majority of the voters... are in favor..." of district elections.

Based on this section, the report concludes that such an election be held to determine whether support exists for district (division) representation. This would mean that the new regional FPD Board would need to call an election placing the issue of district elections before the voters.

If the voters approve districting, Section 13846 (e) requires that "the district board promptly adopt a resolution dividing the district into as many divisions as there are directors." The divisions would need to be nearly equal in population as possible based upon the 2000 census per state law. In addition to population in establishing the divisions, state law permits the board of directors to also consider other factors such as "(1) topography, (2) geography, (3) cohesiveness, contiguity, integrity, and compactness of territory, and (4) community of interests of the divisions."

The goal is to create broad representation by district that will enable different areas within the new regional fire district to gain a voice on the district board. While topography and community of interest can be used to establish these districts, creating roughly equal divisions by population is a basic requirement of state law.

Section 13846 (f) provides that, if the voters approve electing directors by district, thereafter board members shall be elected by division, and each board director shall be a resident of the division they represent. That same section also provides that at the next general election after the division elections are approved by the voters the district board shall assign vacancies on the board created by the respective election divisions and that the vacancies shall be filled from those election divisions.

Similar to the State legislature and the County Board of Supervisors, state law also requires that the divisions lines be redrawn every 10 years, specifically before November 1<sup>st</sup> of the year following the year in which the decennial federal census has been taken.

Most of the Phase I representatives interviewed favored electing the RFPD Board by divisions. This was based on a concern that if the board were elected at large, and

continued to be elected at large, then the population centers of the district would form a majority of the board of directors. In fact, because the proposed district population is concentrated in limited areas within the district, it is conceivable that all members could be elected from these areas.

A current example where this can happen is found in the Rural Fire Protection District. This is a large diverse fire district which is the largest of the Phase I agencies, with a population of approximately 24,000. The board of directors of this district is elected at large. Four of the five directors reportedly live in Jamul, the largest community served by the district, demonstrating that a limited geographic area of a large, diverse district can dominate the composition of its elected board of directors.

A small minority of the Phase I representatives voiced the general and common concern that many people have with district elections, which is that board members may not see, or want to address, broader district issues. There was an understandable concern that board members might not act in the best interests of the district as a whole, but only for the interests of their own district.

However, even those not totally supportive with district elections, acknowledged that an 11-member board elected at large might represent only a limited area where most of the population lives within the RFPD. For example, based on the 2000 census, approximately 80% of the district's population lives in five of the 24 Phase I entities (Ramona Municipal Water District, and the fire protection districts of Valley Center, Deer Springs, East County and Rural).

***County of San Diego (Successor to Dissolved Fire Agencies)***

As previously discussed, the Board of Supervisors is currently elected (by division) by the citizens of the entire county and are representative of the area served. Accordingly, a discussion of holding Board of Supervisors' elections at large or by division is not applicable to this jurisdictional option and is not addressed further in this background report.

Further, the Board has the option to appoint a Fire Commission of five or seven members to advise them on issues of a regional fire entity. As part of this option, the Board could appoint these advisory policy members by areas based population, based on geography and other factors not necessarily related to population, or a combination of both population and geography.

In discussing this issue with the stakeholders, it was concluded that an effort to maximize district (division) representation based on common interests in the diverse areas served by the regional fire entity could be accomplished by a Fire Commission. Since representation on the Commission would not need to be based solely on population, this would enable the Board to make certain that there was a proper balance between representation on the Commission based on population, and based on the diverse geographical interests within the regional fire entity. Again, this would be at the option of the Board.

Finally, area advisory committees within the regional fire entity suggested elsewhere in this report would be useful by providing advice directly to the Fire Commission on regional fire issues.

## **CREATION OF ADVISORY COMMITTEES**

Since one purpose of this background report is to provide a road map for the governance of a regional fire protection entity, it is important to discuss the role of advisory committees - - regardless of whether a regional fire protection district is formed or if county government is designated as the successor to the agencies dissolved in LAFCO's reorganization plan. LAFCO cannot mandate the advisory committees as condition of creating any reorganization option, but it appears to be extremely important that the governing board give this aspect of governance serious consideration.

Consideration of creating advisory committees is not without precedent. For example, the Rural Fire Protection District, which consists of 14 fire stations, has a citizen advisory committee affiliated with each station. Recently, in San Bernardino County, in molding the 32 County Service Areas and Fire Protection Districts of its County Fire Department into one district, and considered creating four advisory committees. The proposal was offered because of that County's large size and diverse makeup. It was felt that it would be advantageous to provide a community voice and input from its diverse geographic areas. Specifically, four advisory committees were considered, one for the valley, one for the mountain area, and two for the desert areas.

While not as widespread as the San Bernardino District, the needs and diversity among the communities in San Diego County are certainly large and wide ranging. Geography ranges from the desert to the mountains. Some of the emergency medical responses find that hospitals outside of the County in Palm Springs and Brawley are closer than those in San Diego County. Clearly, there are wide ranging needs and geography in the proposed new district.

As mentioned previously, reorganization of fire protection and emergency medical services will consolidate over 100 'policy makers' to a 5-11 member board. Creation of advisory committees will provide an opportunity to take advantage of the volunteer resource offered by many of these 'policy makers.' While several of these 'policy makers' will gladly give up their 'policy hats' to the new elected board, many others will still have an interest in imparting their knowledge gained over the years to the elected board via an advisory committee. The advisory committee concept will enable the new district to tap into the unique knowledge, experience, and interest in rural fire protection and emergency medical response by many dedicated volunteers.

One concern that has been expressed by the Phase I fire agency representatives is that board members will not fully understand the various needs of different parts of the district. For example, some very diverse areas, which have a very small population base, such as Mt. Laguna or Ocotillo Wells, must provide protection for a large number of

tourists during weekends or ‘during the season.’ Mountain areas may need four-wheel drive fire trucks with drop down chains. Ocotillo Wells almost exclusively responds to accidents and medical emergencies in the desert. Advisory committee members will help remind the new board of directors of the divergent needs within the district, and will be useful in supplying their historical knowledge and expertise in rural fire protection in the areas where they may currently serve as a ‘policy maker.’

What is proposed is that advisory committees be created representing distinct geographical areas of the district. It is proposed that each committee represent an area that makes sense in terms of geography and community of interest. It is also suggested that each advisory committee be tied to the operational areas discussed elsewhere in this report. One fire protection district board member interviewed for this background report compared the advisory committee concept to the County’s Regional Planning boards on which he has served as a member. While there is a similarity to the regional planning boards, there is not an exact parallel. The community planning boards advise the County Planning Commission who in turn advises the County Board of Supervisors, primarily on land use matters. The proposed advisory committees are obviously concerned with fire suppression and emergency medical response, and will provide their recommendations directly to the members of the board of the regional fire entity.

There are several other advantages to creating advisory committees within the regional governance framework. First, in the individual interviews with the Phase I agency representatives there was near unanimous support for the concept. They liked expanding the level of community involvement through the use of advisory committees, thereby formally adding the local voice of individual rural communities to the operation of the new entity. Further, since driving cost and time might deter some members of the public to attend meetings of the monthly board meetings, having advisory committee meetings conducted in their part of the new regional organization should help give voice to local residents in fire affairs.

Second, the use of advisory committees should help develop support for the creation of and subsequent successful operation of the proposed regional district. If current Phase I board members feel that their views can be expressed and their concerns addressed through the advisory committees, there is a greater likelihood that they will support the establishment of a new regional fire agency.

Third, advisory committees can also fulfill a ‘watchdog’ role. Many rural fire department representatives expressed the concern that their equipment, which they worked very hard over the years to acquire through grants and fundraisers, would be swept away to other parts of the new district. While some relocation of apparatus may occur for the overall benefit of the district, the advisory committees will have an opportunity to comment on any actions regarding equipment transfer or other operational moves being taken.

Fourth, the advisory committees could be useful to staff of the new regional organization in providing support for developing Fire Safe Councils and CERT teams. Active involvement by knowledgeable volunteers on the advisory committees should prove



useful in developing additional community volunteer resources. These volunteers would likely be more active in their community and perhaps help kick start Fire Safe Councils and CERT teams where there is currently a void of these resources.

Fifth, the advisory committees could also be helpful in providing support to station committees and their local fundraisers, which have been the heart of many of the volunteer departments. While new levels and sources of funds must be found for the successful operation of the proposed regional fire district, local fund raising by local volunteers undoubtedly will still be needed to supplement district purchases, especially specialized equipment that might provide a higher level of service for the area offering the donations.

## **OTHER ISSUES**

The discussion in this section so far addresses the major issues involved in determining the basic governance structure of a Regional Fire Protection District or the assignment of regional fire agency responsibilities to the County of San Diego. In addition, there are other issues or questions that might arise from the reorganization of fire protection services.

**What Happens If The Regional Fire Protection District Expands?** When LAFCO's Macro Study was completed, the Commission decided to study via the Micro Report the creation of a regional fire agency from among the 17 Phase I agencies, and an area served by 7 volunteer organizations. These agencies and organizations, serve mostly rural areas of the County, and are funded or unfunded.

There are also 8 Phase II agencies, which may be part of a subsequent LAFCO study for possible inclusion in the RFPD. These are larger, better-funded fire districts that serve more suburban areas than the Phase I departments.

There are a couple of ways in which the Phase II agencies could be part of or affiliated with a new regional organization. One is through the creation of a Joint Powers Authority (JPA). This would assume that over time the regional organization would become well established with a stable financial base, and would be able to provide the level of service envisioned in this report. It could then be an attractive partner with other fire agencies as part of a JPA. This JPA potentially could include the regional organization along with some, and over time, perhaps all of the Phase II agencies. It would be expected that before a JPA is created, extensive discussions would occur to detail the points and understandings that would be needed among the parties for the successful operation of the JPA.

The participation of the new regional organization in a JPA would not be a determination made by LAFCO now or at a later date. It would be a decision by the governing board of the affected agencies at the time a JPA proposal would appear viable.

Another alternative would be to reorganize the regional organization through LAFCO. This would involve expanding the boundaries of the new agency to include or annex one or more of the Phase II departments. If this occurred, the population base of the regional district would expand.

If a reorganized regional FPD were formed, there would be an opportunity for new board members from the annexed fire protection district(s) to be elected to the regional district board. Given the larger population of many of the Phase II agencies, there would appear to be a good likelihood that citizens from the Phase II agencies would achieve membership on the regional district board. If a regional FPD is not formed and the County is assigned successor responsibilities, then affected citizens and the Board of Supervisors will need to evaluate whether the current structure of the Board of Supervisors is adequate to handle the added fire protection and emergency medical responsibilities of a larger population base -- or whether a fire advisory commission is necessary to advise the board on these responsibilities.

### **Should service Islands be included in a new regional fire organization?**

It may make operational sense to not include some existing service islands within the proposed regional fire agency. Two Phase I agencies are largely separated geographically from the proposed regional fire organization. For example, Elfin Forest is a candidate for sub-regional consolidation. There are on-going discussions to create a JPA, with Elfin Forest, Rancho Santa Fe, and the cities of Del Mar and Solano Beach as members. This would merge four geographically connected fire departments into one fire operation.

The other island area is the De Luz VFD. This area has a very low call volume (50 calls/year), and is separated from the boundaries of the proposed regional fire agency by the North County FPD. Past efforts to pass a local assessment in De Luz failed. In addition, geographically and operationally, it may make sense for De Luz to be part of North County FPD. Another approach would be to extend the CDF contract at the CDF station in De Luz to provide a full range of services to De Luz through the County's Fire Service Program. The existing volunteer program could continue in support of the CDF station, but probably should receive at least some limited support by the County's program, North County, or the proposed regional fire agency.

One option, then, in establishing the governance structure for the new regional organization would be to create a new organization with contiguous boundaries. This should facilitate its operations, and create more recognizable geographical boundaries.

### **OTHER GOVERNANCE OPTIONS**

**Contract With A Larger Agency.** Another governance structure option involves contracting with a larger agency for basic infrastructure services such as general administration and management, budgeting, grant writing, dispatch, communications, training, coordination of volunteers and maintenance. For example, one candidate for providing this basic infrastructure for the new regional department is the City of San

Diego. As the largest local government in the County, they have the administrative structure to provide overall management to the regional district, including all of the administrative support services including clerical, accounting, budgeting, and grant writing. The City also has the ability to provide dispatch and other communication services, including radio repair. They have a training function and could provide oversight and coordination of the volunteer program. Finally, they have maintenance facilities that can handle repair and maintenance of fire apparatus, although their facilities, as well as those of other fire agencies, are far removed from most of the rural fire stations.

Other agencies that could also provide support for a regional fire district would be CDF or San Diego County. CDF has an overall administrative structure that could support a regional entity, plus training, dispatch, and maintenance capabilities. On the other hand, CDF as a state agency is oriented more toward command and control over wild land fires, rather than structural fires. However, CDF does provide some contracts providing structural fire protection.

San Diego County has been providing funding through their Fire Service Program, now at approximately \$8.5 million annually for apparatus acquisition and improved fire protection service, through CDF contracts. They also have a substantial amount of administrative infrastructure. Further, the County has maintenance service yards throughout the county that could be retooled to service fire apparatus. Until recently, the County has eschewed the placement of regional fire protection into its list of core responsibilities. Some options to involve the County more directly in providing a regional umbrella for fire service to the unincorporated areas are discussed in the following paragraphs.

**County Fire Department.** The County Board of Supervisors requested, and the LAFCO Commission agreed, that the MICRO Study examine the creation of the San Diego Regional Fire Protection District, with an elected board of directors, as discussed earlier in this report. However, in reviewing the governance of fire agencies in other California counties in another section of this report, it is clear that other governance structures can be used effectively in providing fire and emergency medical service to suburban and rural areas in a regional setting. For example, Orange County provides its service to 1,300,000 people through a J.P.A. Sacramento Metro is organized through a regional district, like the one being evaluated in this report. Riverside and San Bernardino have county fire departments, each structured differently.

It is understandable that the Board of Supervisors initially requested the study of a regional FPD since historically the County has avoided creating a county fire department. In the 1920s the County entered into a contract with CDF, which contract was significantly increased in 1972-73. However, the Board of Supervisors decided in 1974 to phase out the CDF contract. The Board at that time further decided that the unincorporated communities should be encouraged to assume structural fire protection responsibilities, with some limited assistance from the County. The CDF contract was

cancelled in 1975, and the Board subsequently declared that a County fire department would not be formed.

However, while individual communities have developed significant fire suppression and emergency medical capabilities with very little or minimal resources, and mostly with volunteer firefighters, it is not at the level, uniformity, or consistency of service that is expected in the underserved and unserved areas of the County. The Cedar Fire further underscored the lack of resources, coordination, and communication needed to fight a major wild land fire that also attacked adjacent urban development.

Subsequently, the County has developed a Fire Service Plan that has increased subsidization of fire protection services in the unincorporated area. Approximately, \$8,500,000 is budgeted this year to support additional service in the rural areas mostly for additional staff through CDF contracts for improved operations, and the purchase of fire apparatus. Given this level of investment and commitment, the Board of Supervisors may not want to ultimately turn control of these funds over to a separately elected district board.

This increased subsidization of fire services in the unincorporated rural areas would necessitate the evaluation of jurisdictional alternatives for the provision of these services. As previously discussed, these alternatives could involve the designation of the County of San Diego as the successor to the dissolved fire agencies and volunteer fire entities. This would likely involve the creation of some form of County Fire Department. This could be accomplished by dissolving special fire districts and transferring the responsibility for fire protection and emergency services to the County. The organization of that function within the County government structure would need to be determined by the Board of Supervisors.

**Transferring Phase I Responsibility to a County Service Area.** An alternative to establishment of a County Fire Department would be to use a dependent district of the County to be the successor to the dissolved fire agencies and the volunteer fire organizations. This is similar to what San Bernardino County is currently pursuing through their LAFCO. In effect, a dependent district, with the Board of Supervisors serving at that district's board of directors, would oversee fire service to the rural, unincorporated areas of the County. This would still accomplish needed overall management of this larger fire organization under the control of the Board of Supervisors, without creating a County Fire Department per se. This would have the possible advantage of consistency with existing county policy. It also would reduce, although probably not eliminate, liability exposure for fire operations to the County.

**County Control Through CDF Contracts.** A third approach in developing some form of a county umbrella fire entity would be to leave the special districts and volunteer organizations in place, and further expand the County's current Fire Service Program by further subsidizing structural fire protection service through CDF contracts. This is the least advantageous method of supporting regional fire protection since there will not be overall management of regional fire and other emergency resources. There still would be

the inefficiency of having multiple fire chiefs. Further, there will be inefficiency in the provision of administrative support services. While training resources can be provided through CDF, as they are currently being provided using two CDF Captains, this approach will not necessarily provide uniform training standards and a uniform training program. Maintenance of apparatus will still be provided by a variety of public, private and volunteer mechanics with no consistency in level of maintenance. On the other hand, dispatch services through CDF and Heartland as they are currently being provided probably will continue to achieve a reasonable level of efficiency and effectiveness.

**Joint Powers Agency (J.P.A.).** Another approach would be to establish a Joint Powers Agency where various agencies join together in creating a single fire agency. This agency would have a board of directors, selected under the terms of the JPA agreement, usually consisting of representatives of the member agencies. The directors are usually appointed, not elected.

An example of an effective county wide fire JPA is the one found in Orange County. Its board consists of representatives of the County and its 22 member cities. Since a large board of directors usually is not that effective, a smaller executive committee has been created to meet monthly and provide policy direction to JPA operations. One of the reasons this JPA has been effective is because it has a substantial property tax base. Another reason is that its members represent well established governmental organizations such as the County and the various cities.

This report does not advocate the use of a JPA as a regional governmental umbrella agency, but it is a concept worth exploring in the future. The main disadvantage for creating a JPA among the Phase I agencies is that there is there is a lack of administrative structure and financial tax base for the JPA to be successful. Most of the individual Phase I fire agencies, and certainly the volunteer entities, do not have the resources to effectively participate in a JPA.

This report does foresee that in the future, if a regional fire agency is established, and over time becomes operational and financially stable, that there may be opportunities for it to become a member of a JPA with other fire agencies. The JPA, for example, could consist of the regional agency and one or more Phase II agencies, or other, smaller cities. So, there could be a role for a county wide JPA after the proposed new regional entity matures and becomes stable fire agency.

## RETENTION OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers represent an important component of any regional fire organization that consists of a diverse population base and geographic land area. A summary of the recommendations to retain and improve the volunteer support for this district is summarized at the end of this section.

### INTRODUCTION

The importance of volunteers to the fire service cannot be stressed too strongly. From a historical perspective, one of the first organized volunteer fire company was established in Boston as early as 1717. In the late 1800s in Southern California, the cities of that era created volunteer fire departments. Later, neighboring Riverside County in 1921 signed the first formal agreement with the State for providing fire service using volunteer firefighters along with paid personnel. Then in 1939, section 14825 of the Health and Safety code was enacted which allows citizens of a community to form a volunteer fire company. Section 14831 of the same code authorizes the local board of supervisors to regulate the formation and continued existence of volunteer fire companies. Today, volunteers are used in both urban and rural fire departments throughout the state to provide crucial fire suppression and emergency medical service to Californians.

In San Diego County, volunteers are the lifeblood of the Phase I agencies that provide fire suppression and emergency medical service in the unincorporated areas that they serve. It is estimated that there are over 450 volunteers who serve as firefighters in the various fire protection districts, municipal water districts that also provide fire service, county service areas, and volunteer fire departments. In addition to the volunteer firefighters, there are volunteers who provide a wide variety of important support services. These volunteers serve as mechanics, public information officers, ham radio operators, training officers, and so on.

**Reserves.** The individual meetings conducted by the consultants with representatives of the Phase I agencies revealed that most volunteer departments, particularly those that rely most heavily on volunteers, typically have 4-5 volunteer firefighters who live in the community being served. The remaining volunteer firefighters at the volunteer stations are often called 'reserves.' The reserves consist of young adults taking fire science courses in local community colleges who desire experience that would assist their effort to become professional firefighters.

The reserves are willing to travel long distances to assist rural fire departments and at the same time meet their career goals. Most often the reserves are unpaid, and frequently must pay for their own uniforms, station dues, and the cost of transportation to and from the station where they volunteer, and for some parts of their training.

Because of the lack of local volunteers, these reserves help fill the need for volunteer firefighters in the County's rural areas. Even where there are adequate numbers of volunteers in a community, the local volunteers are often unavailable during day,

Monday-Friday, commuting to their places of employment. This also makes reserves critical to the operations of volunteer fire departments.

Even though there is wide spread use of volunteer reserve firefighters who live outside of the Phase I communities, at least two restrict their volunteers to those living within their communities. Those agencies are the Julian Fire Protection District and the Sunshine Summit Volunteer Fire Department. Sunshine Summit was scheduled to change this regulation so that Navy personnel who use a local training facility can volunteer with their Department.

For some Phase I agencies, particularly those who contract with CDF, there is a stipend or other payment provided to the reserves. In Valley Center, for example, they use minimum wage reserves who are district employees, not CDF employees. In Deer Springs and Ramona, reserves do not receive a salary, but receive a \$200 stipend per shift in Deer Springs, and a \$50 stipend per shift in Ramona. In Borrego Springs, volunteers receive \$65 per shift as expense reimbursement. In the East County FPD volunteers are paid \$6.75 an hour, but only if they are serving as part of Strike Team on call in another region.

**Non-firefighter volunteers.** It cannot be overlooked that, in addition to volunteer and reserve firefighters, there are a significant number of volunteers, mostly non firefighters, who serve on the boards of directors of the fire and water districts, CSAs, and the 501 (c)(3) entities that oversee the volunteer fire departments. These men and women spend a considerable amount of time raising funds for their departments, seeking grants to buy apparatus and other equipment, developing community support for their volunteer departments, recruiting fire suppression volunteers, communicating with other agencies including other fire agencies, and giving policy and financial oversight to their departments. And several of these ‘policy’ volunteers also serve a dual role as ‘firefighter’ volunteers, serving as a firefighter as well as on the fire entities’ board of directors.

**LAFCO Commission Direction.** When the LAFCO Commission directed the completion of the Micro Study, and narrowed the scope of the Study to focus on Models 5, 6 and 7, they “...included volunteer fire protection companies and volunteers within local agencies as part of Models 5, 6 and 7.” As the Micro Study has proceeded, it is clear that this direction by the Commission is becoming even more important in achieving the eventual success of the proposed regional fire agency. This is because a well-conceived and organized volunteer program will secure needed community support for the proposed district. The prudent use of volunteers will also assist in achieving the financial feasibility of the regional entity.

**Other Counties.** Even nearby counties, which for years have had an established county fire department or regional fire operation such as Orange County (Joint Powers Authority), or the Riverside or the San Bernardino County Fire Departments, rely heavily on volunteers. For example, even though the Orange County Fire Authority serves 22 cities, the unincorporated area and the State Responsibility Area (SRA) usually served by

CDF, the Authority maintains several volunteer fire companies. Riverside relies on volunteers even more, with a complement of roughly 1,100 volunteers.

**Conclusion.** The current level of fire suppression and emergency medical service provided in the rural underserved and unserved areas would be virtually nonexistent without volunteer firefighters. Over the years, people in the many small rural communities and enclaves throughout San Diego County have devoted significant amounts of time and money to provide fire and emergency medical services to their communities, to the visitors from throughout the county who travel through and to their communities, and to the thousands of tourists who visit all areas of San Diego County. The fact that fire stations have been built and fire apparatus purchased and operated by the volunteers is a testament to their knowledge, experience, fortitude and diligence.

### **Role of Volunteers in Regional Fire Protection District**

Given the importance of volunteers to rural fire protection, a significant question is, “Will the creation of a new regional fire protection organization drive away volunteers?” If the volunteer program of the new organization is structured properly, it should retain and enhance the overall volunteer program, not diminish or destroy it. There are issues in the volunteer program of the new district that will need to be addressed, but with proper forethought and planning, communication and coordination, the volunteer program should improve.

There are a number of areas where the volunteer program for the new district can be encouraged and enhanced, or at least properly addressed. These are discussed in the following paragraphs.

**Policy Making.** Currently, there are over 100 elected and appointed policy makers, or board members, from the various special districts, community service areas and nonprofit organizations which comprise the Phase I fire agencies. One of the conclusions of this report in the Governance section is to retain as many of these policy makers as possible, given their knowledge of fire service in the rural areas. While state law limits the number of elected members that can serve on either a regional fire district or board of supervisors, this report suggests that advisory committees be created to tap into the collective background of these volunteers. An advisory committee of 7 – 9 members in each of the geographically defined regions should supplement the governing board of the successor entity. This will enable knowledgeable and experienced policy volunteers to have the opportunity to serve in the new organization.

In addition, the need for fund raising activity in the rural communities will continue even with the creation of a regional fire agency. It is expected that the 501 (c)(3) organizations will be needed and will continue to function and flourish in support of their local fire stations.

This is similar to the Rural Fire Protection District, which continues to maintain volunteer committees at many of their stations long after those stations were incorporated into the



District. The report recommends that these station committees in the Rural FPD, and elsewhere in the proposed organization, be maintained in addition to proposed advisory committees mentioned above. The value of the personal relationships between a local board, the community and the fire service are important and cannot be overstated.

Another aspect of the proposed advisory committees is that they can be tied to the operational areas discussed in the Operational Section of this report. It is important that each advisory committee have a geographical and operational focus. By linking the advisory committees to the operational areas, each committee will have a Battalion Chief with whom to interact. High-level staff support for each advisory committee is essential for them to be effective, and for the advisory committees to provide the best possible input to District staff and its elected board of directors.

**Volunteer Manual.** To help support an effective volunteer program, it is necessary for the proposed regional district board and staff to provide programs to help support the volunteers, by providing structure, training, and funding. To provide that structure, it is recommended that a policy manual be developed similar to the one that has been adopted in Riverside County. As an illustration of what such a manual could include, the Riverside County Fire Department Volunteer Fire Company Operating Policy Manual is available at LAFCO Offices for review.

While a volunteer manual in San Diego will reflect the specific requirements of the proposed Regional Fire Protection District, the Riverside manual should be helpful in securing many of the needed detail operating provisions San Diego's volunteer operations will need. In many cases, the Riverside manual would avoid having to 'reinvent the wheel' when it comes to developing the San Diego manual.

The Riverside manual not only outlines the organization and structure for volunteers at each station, but also at the countywide level as well. It covers volunteer fire company membership, including conditions of membership, levels of volunteer fire company organization, and the conduct and administration of internal volunteer company affairs, such as business meetings, membership size, records, discipline, rules of conduct, complaint and appeal procedures, equipment issue and accountability, uniforms, patches and hats, and the election of officers.

In addition, the manual discusses training requirements, titles, rank and pay, and provides for various levels of certification. It also discusses operational issues regarding chain of command, liaison between the professional fire staff and volunteers, crew assignments, inspection and maintenance of emergency equipment, volunteer minimum emergency response requirements, and general and specific safety practices.

The manual also outlines emergency incident operations such as reporting a fire or emergency, driving policy, code-3 driving, emergency incident supervision and

operations, cover assignments and extended assignments, and emergency operations chain of command. The manual further supplies sample volunteer fire company bylaws, sample business meeting agenda, applicant interview procedures, interview board summary report, and certification checklists for various volunteer ranks.

Again, it should be stressed that the Riverside manual is suggested only as a guide, albeit a valuable one, for the proposed regional district, and that the specific details for a similar manual in San Diego County would need to be developed once the regional fire agency is created.

### **Volunteer Operations of Other Counties**

Besides the Volunteer Operations Manual just discussed, there is much knowledge and information that can be gained from adjacent counties, which should be useful in developing the model for the proposed regional fire agency and particularly its volunteer program. In this section, the volunteer operations of Orange and Riverside Counties, and their applicability to San Diego County, will be presented.

Orange and Riverside Counties are organized differently, with Orange County served through the Orange County Fire Authority, a Joint Powers Agency made up of the County and 22 cities. Riverside County has a County Fire Department, and contracts for fire service with CDF. Besides the County's unincorporated area, it also serves 16 cities and one fire protection district.

**Organization.** The Orange County Fire Authority, headed by a Fire Chief, is divided into five geographical operational divisions, with a total of 62 fire stations. Each division is under the command of a Division Chief, with most divisions divided into two battalions under the direction of a Battalion Chief. There are several stations per Battalion.

Riverside County is also organized into geographical operational areas, also headed by a Fire Chief, divided into divisions, and further split into battalions. Each battalion has a Battalion Chief responsible for several fire stations. The Riverside Fire Department oversees 91 fire stations, with 45 stations owned by the County, 9 owned by the state, 31 owned by the cities, and six run by volunteer firefighters.

Even though both counties are organized differently (J.P.A. vs. County Fire Department), the basic structure of dividing each department by division and then battalions is the same. It is not surprising, therefore, that this report recommends a similar organizational structure among the 42 fire stations among the 24 Phase I Agencies. As discussed elsewhere, it is proposed that a Battalion Chief divide the proposed regional district into operational divisions each headed.

**Levels of Volunteers.** Orange County has approximately 390 volunteer firefighters. These volunteers must be at least 18 years of age, possess a valid California Drivers

License, and be able to obtain an Emergency Medical Technician Certificate within 18 months of appointment, plus pass a background check. These volunteer firefighters must also pass either a light, moderate, arduous or comprehensive physical test requirements.

The volunteers are then designated as either a Level 1, 2 or 3 reserve. A Level 1 reserve is assigned to an Engine Company, and receives training to respond to structural and wild land fires, traffic collisions, and medical aid emergencies. A Level 2 reserve is assigned to Patrols, and receives training to respond to traffic collisions and medical aid emergencies. A Level 3 reserve is assigned to a Squad, and receives training to respond to medical aid emergencies.

Riverside County, with 1,100 volunteers, has volunteer firefighters and support volunteers (non-firefighter auxiliary/honorary/board members). The support volunteers do not need to meet the physical skills requirements of volunteer firefighters.

Volunteer firefighters are first designated a 'recruit' until they complete the Department's Trainee Firefighter certification checklist. They then may move up through the ranks of volunteer firefighter, engineer, lieutenant, and captain, depending on the extent of training and experience they achieve as a volunteer.

The Auxiliary/Honorary members of a volunteer fire company in Riverside County perform tasks such as fire prevention programs, volunteer fundraising, company committees, community relations, and can serve as administrative board members.

For San Diego County, this report recommends a similar division between volunteer firefighters and non-firefighter volunteers. To maintain the strength and to actually enhance the County's current volunteer establishment, steps to encourage more volunteer firefighters throughout the Phase I agencies are recommended by this report. Further, non-firefighter volunteers who presently provide such valuable direction and support for the Phase I agencies need to be maintained. These volunteers will be an important part of the transition process from 24 separate fire agencies to one regional fire district, and will be crucial to the success of the new district.

**Residency Requirements.** One requirement maintained by both Orange and Riverside Counties would not work well in San Diego County. Orange County requires that their Reserve Firefighters live within 10 minutes of a reserve fire station, or within 30 minutes of a reserve fire crew station. Riverside County stipulates that a volunteer firefighter applicant must reside within the Initial Attack Area (IAA) of the station to which they are attempting to secure membership.

While, as previously pointed out, many of the Phase I agencies relying on volunteer firefighters have 4-5 volunteers who live in their community and are within a reasonable time response to their fire station, the bulk of their volunteers live well outside of their agency's boundaries. The imposition of a 'time' or 'area' limitation on the volunteers supporting a particular station would not work in San Diego due to the remoteness of several of the CSAs and volunteer fire departments among the Phase I agencies. The use

of a 'time' or 'area' limitation would literally kill the volunteer support for several of the Phase I agencies.

While Riverside County does include an exception to their 'area' requirement, the exception is narrowly drawn for volunteer applicants living in 'non-contract' cities, or immediately outside of Riverside County. The proposed regional fire protection district should have more flexibility in assigning its volunteers.

The proposed regional fire district in San Diego County should be able to secure volunteers from throughout the County as well as adjacent counties. What the proposed district can achieve that is not now being accomplished is a better organization and coordination of an overall volunteer program. Working with the entire pool of volunteer firefighters, including recruits, the district should be able to provide for uniform intake, processing, training, and assignment. While not necessarily living within the boundaries of the station to which they are assigned, the district will be able to designate recruits to closest or next closest stations to their residence.

**Size of Volunteer Fire Companies.** Another restriction that is imposed in Riverside County that probably would not work in San Diego County, and is not recommended by this report, is a limitation on the size of volunteer fire companies. In Riverside, the volunteer companies are limited to minimum of 7 to a maximum of 35 members. Many of San Diego's Phase I agencies cannot meet a minimum of 7 volunteers within their own communities without relying on outside reserves. Some of the Phase I agencies exceed 35 volunteers. While these minimum/maximum restraints might work well in Riverside County, the setting of minimum/maximum numbers on a station's volunteers would be premature at this time in San Diego. Later, after the regional district becomes established, addressing the size of the volunteer fire companies can be addressed, if necessary.

**Transition.** Another critical issue that the proposed new regional fire organization must face is the transition from over 20 fire protection agencies and organizations into one new regional entity. The transition from separate organizations, each with their own Fire Chief, and operational procedures and equipment, into one larger organization with a different staff and operational structure with a new elected board of directors, is difficult at best. Of course, there is concern by existing agencies about the use of 'their' equipment and tax resources in other parts of the new district. In most cases, tax resources, especially special assessments, must be used in the area where they are approved. Also, it is likely that most equipment will remain where it is assigned, although this report will recommend ways in which the overall equipment available for fire suppression and emergency medical services can be improved.

It is informative that the transition issue has already been addressed by three of the Phase I agencies, albeit on a much more limited scale than what is recommended by this report.

The Julian Fire Protection District, for example, serves the communities of Julian and Cuyumaca. This FPD has already had to deal with the issue of using resources from one community in another community that has limited tax and volunteer resources.

Another example is the East County Fire Protection District where Bostonia and Crest merged in 1994. It is estimated that it took six years before the two organizational cultures of the two fire departments were blended into one.

Even more to the point is the Rural Fire Protection District, which was a consolidation of 14 fire stations. Initially, there was a District Fire Chief, but each station also had a 'Chief' as well. It was reported that there was conflict, at times, over the chain-of-command among the Chiefs. Since there was a need to clarify the reporting relationships among the 'chiefs,' the chief officer at each station was designated a 'Captain' reporting to the command structure of the District headed by the 'Fire Chief.'

Similar steps will be necessary for the proposed regional fire agency. A clear chain-of-command will be necessary. There will only be one Fire Chief, supported by, Division Chiefs, Battalion Chiefs, and Captains. The interrelationship between the paid command staff and firefighters and the volunteer structure and firefighters will be a crucial factor in the success of the new regional district. A discussion of this interrelationship is discussed in the following section on 'liaison.'

**Liaison.** One of the crucial and most delicate issues to be addressed by this report and one that will confront the proposed agency is the liaison between new full-time fire staff and firefighters, and the District's volunteer firefighters and non-firefighters.

In Riverside County either a Fire Captain or Fire Apparatus Engineer is assigned to the volunteer fire company as the liaison officer at each station. The liaison officer is tasked to confer with the volunteer fire company president on applicable station level issues that are directly or indirectly related to the volunteer company and/or its members. The elected VFC officers are responsible for the business affairs and routine operational procedures of the volunteer unit. If a station has a volunteer Lieutenant or Captain, that person is responsible for coordinating operational procedures with the liaison officer. In the case of a temporarily unstaffed station, the volunteer lieutenant/captain, and/or the VFC president shall supervise the station operations when the liaison officer is not in attendance.

In Riverside's volunteer manual, several important conditions are placed on the liaison role. These are:

- Professional fire staff is "discouraged from holding a VFC President position and/or being signatory to or an influencing factor to any financial transaction involving VFC funds."
- Professional fire staff shall "...secure written VFC and Battalion Chief approval, prior to operating the VFC owned apparatus."

- “The Department agrees to indemnify and hold the VFC harmless for any damage, or liability resulting from the operation or use of a VFC owned vehicle by a department paid and/or volunteer staff.”

These conditions appear designed to separate full-time fire fighting staff from the leadership and financial roles of the volunteer fire company at each fire station. In addition, the VFC must provide permission for the use of its equipment and is held harmless for any damage or liability that may result for its use in the fire service.

In San Diego County, there will no longer be volunteer Fire Chiefs heading up each volunteer fire station. There will be, however, a volunteer committee President and/or volunteer Captain or Lieutenant, who will coordinate volunteer operations and business with the full-time firefighter assigned to that station as the liaison officer. The precise roles and responsibilities of the liaison officer and the volunteer leadership will need to be determined once the proposed regional fire district is created. However, this report recommends that fire staff liaison be established at each station to coordinate with the volunteer leadership, and that lessons learned from Riverside County and the three Phase I agencies in San Diego County that have already had some level of transition experience be incorporated into the policies and procedures of the new fire district.

## **Operations**

**Staffing.** As discussed in the Operations Section of this report, it is likely that not all stations be staffed 24/7 with 3 or 4 full time firefighters at the BLS or ALS level of service as envisioned in Models 5, 6 and 7. Some stations will be staffed at that level based on an analysis of the number and location of calls for service. Other stations, however, will not need that level of staffing because of limited call volume. In these stations, one approach is that one full-time firefighter be assigned 24/7 supported by volunteer firefighters.

By building on the existing volunteer program with a full-time firefighter available 24/7, an improved level of service will be provided at these fire stations. The full-time firefighter, properly certified can provide training to the volunteers at the station. One of the problems expressed at several of Phase I stations was that their volunteers had to leave the community to receive training. This recommendation will enable this resource (volunteers) to stay in their community while receiving much of their training.

**Expense of Being a Volunteer.** Another issue raised by representatives of the Phase I agencies is the expense of being a volunteer firefighter. In many of the Phase I agencies, the volunteer must buy their uniforms, turnout gear, such as helmets, jackets and boots. They must also pay station dues and buy the gas necessary to drive from their homes to and from the station. To help eliminate some of the financial drain placed on these volunteers it is recommended that the economic barrier to being a volunteer firefighter be removed, either by the proposed district paying for turnout gear and other expenses, or more simply by paying a stipend to the volunteer firefighters to pay for uniforms and for gasoline for those who have a long commute and live outside of the area they serve. As

pointed out earlier in this Section, some of the suburban Phase I agencies pay a stipend to volunteer firefighters. The new agency should consider applying such a stipend throughout the entire organization to achieve uniformity.

**Health Insurance.** Another benefit the regional agency should address is to look at creating health insurance opportunities for the volunteer firefighters. One of major issues expressed by some of the Phase I agency representatives is the inability of their members to secure health insurance. If the opportunity to purchase health insurance, even on a limited basis, were provided, a major incentive would be offered to the volunteer firefighters to continue to volunteer, and to attract additional volunteers. It would also provide incentive to the Phase I agencies to support the creation of the regional district.

**Liability Insurance.** In addition, in exchange for the volunteer fire departments and volunteer firefighters to come under a cooperative framework of a regional fire district, it is important that they be provided general liability insurance and hold harmless protection by the proposed district. Director and officer coverage, property damage and public liability coverage when working under the direction of the district should be provided. The umbrella of affiliation provided by the proposed district would offer benefits that are not normally afforded completely independent fire companies.

## **Conclusion**

The importance of volunteer firefighters to the success of a regional fire protection agency, or any other fire suppression organizational structure to serve the County's rural areas cannot be overly emphasized. The ability to coordinate and manage the volunteer program on a regional basis should be a real plus in unifying and thereby improving the volunteer program across the area currently served by the 24 Phase I agencies. Especially if training, stipend and insurance programs can be uniformly applied to the region now served by the separate agencies as part of a regional fire operation, more consistent training practices can be provided and better incentives to attract volunteers and reduce turnover can be provided. Also, with at least one career firefighter at each station for guidance, direction and training purposes, the ability to keep the volunteer 'resource' within the community, while receiving training, will be greatly enhanced.

Development of a Volunteer Manual to outline the organization and structure for volunteers at each station, as well as the district-wide volunteer organization, is important for the success of the volunteer program. Developing local volunteer support at each station, as well as acknowledging the role of 'non-firefighter' volunteers, is important components of any successful volunteer program.

Finally, staffing by well-trained volunteers to support career firefighters, where fulltime career staffing of a station is not feasible, will be critical to providing improved fire suppression and emergency medical services throughout the County.

Serious attention to the 11 recommendations of this Section is suggested in order to develop a successful regional volunteer program. The result should be a program that

will not ‘drive away’ current volunteers, but retain them and attract even more volunteers to serve the County’s rural areas.

## **Recommendations**

1. Models 5, 6 and 7, with 3-0 or 4-0 staffing at BLS and ALS levels, should be modified per Commission direction to include the use and support of volunteers.
2. Where call volume does not support 3-0 or 4-0 full-time professional firefighting staff, at least one full-time firefighter should be assigned at each of these stations, allowing, among other features, the training of the volunteer firefighters in their community.
3. Provide a uniform training program for volunteer and reserve firefighters, using, where possible, full-time firefighters at each station and the local community college system.
4. Establish Advisory Committees, representing the geographic, operational areas of the proposed district, to advise staff and elected officials. (See Governance and Operations Sections).
5. Establish a volunteer committee at each station. This should involve retaining existing station advisory committees and/or non-profit boards to serve as each station’s advisory committee.
6. As a guide for the proposed district, it is recommended that a Volunteer Manual be written to outline the organization and structure for volunteers at each station, as well as the district wide volunteer organization.
7. As a guide for the proposed district, it is recommended that at each station a full-time firefighter be assigned to act as the liaison officer to coordinate with the volunteer leadership. In that connection, district fire staff should not be permitted to hold leadership positions in or influence the financial decisions of the station’s volunteer organization.
8. As a guide for the proposed district, it is recommended that the Volunteer Manual not contain, at least initially, residency requirements or limitations on the numbers of volunteers at each station.
9. A uniform, district-wide level of compensation, such as a stipend, should be afforded volunteer firefighters to cover their out of pocket expenses and to encourage and attract more volunteers to the fire service.
10. The opportunity for volunteers to purchase limited health insurance coverage should be provided by the district.
11. The district should provide liability insurance for the volunteer organizations and individual volunteers.



## **COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF SELECTED CALIFORNIA COUNTIES**

It is useful and informative to learn what other California counties have achieved in providing regional or countywide fire service in the process of evaluating what is proposed in this report for San Diego. These are counties that are somewhat similar to San Diego in population, service area and /or organization and governance. Since these counties face similar challenges to San Diego in terms of providing fire service to both suburban and rural areas, but have a much longer history in meeting these challenges, an examination of that history can provide some 'lessons learned' for San Diego as it looks to the future.

Also, while the counties studied may have different organizational structures, they have developed some common solutions to many of the issues now confronting San Diego County. These counties offer 'lessons learned' to aid San Diego in shaping the structure of a regional fire protection entity. A summary of the fire service governance structure and operations of these other counties are presented in the following paragraphs, along with potential 'lessons learned' from each county.

The counties discussed in this section include neighbors, Orange and Riverside Counties, nearby San Bernardino County, and Sacramento County. Los Angeles County was excluded from this list due to its size compared to San Diego. Also, the four counties examined – Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Sacramento – present enough diversity of structure and operations to be useful for this report. As will be seen, these counties were able to successfully address many of countywide fire issues a number of years in advance of San Diego's current effort to consolidate its rural firefighting efforts.

### **Orange County**

For an extended period, from about 1930 to 1980, the California Department of Forestry and Fire (CDF) provided for fire suppression in the county. Then, in 1980 the Orange County Fire Department was formed. After a few years of operation, and because of the County's bankruptcy, participating cities desired greater control of firefighting services. That led to the creation of a Joint Powers Authority in 1995, establishing the Orange County Fire Authority (OCFA), which now provides fire service in the County.

The Authority consists of the County and 22 cities. It serves its member agencies plus provides contractual services to John Wayne Airport and the State Responsibility Area (SRA), formerly served by CDF. In providing service to the SRA, the Authority is one of six 'gray book' counties in California.

The Authority is fortunate to have a property tax base to support much of its operation. The Authority reports a property tax base of \$.11 per \$1.00 for 15 of its cities, plus the unincorporated area. This revenue from property taxes flows into a "Structural Fire Fund" in an annual amount of approximately \$120,000,000 (FY 2005-06).

In addition, the Authority receives approximately \$43,000,000 from the 7 remaining cities through contract with the Authority. The last large revenue source for the Authority is the approximately \$7,000,000 it receives from the State to cover the state responsibility lands in Orange County. This contractual and property tax revenue, plus other revenue sources, such as minor contracts, fines, etc., support an operating budget of approximately \$193,000,000. In FY 2006-07, anticipated revenues will amount to \$221 million. Sixty-nine percent (\$150 million) will be generated from property tax receipts; twenty-two percent (\$53 million) from charges for service, including contracts with cities.

This budget helps serve a population of 1,300,000 living in 551 square miles. It supports five geographical operational divisions, with a total of 62 fire stations, with 765 career firefighters, 315 support staff, and 75 engines, two helicopters, and 390 reserve volunteer positions. The volunteers staff five engines (Majestic, Villa Park, Turbuco Canyon, and Sunset Beach).

As can be seen, Orange County is fortunate in having a substantial property tax base, plus a network of contracting cities, for supporting a substantial fire suppression and emergency response operation. In addition, it serves a more urban area than what is envisioned for San Diego's Regional Fire Protection District. Also, its structure is different, using a J.P.A., compared to what is being studied in San Diego. Finally, its use of volunteers in proportion to its career firefighters, even with five exclusive volunteer companies, is likely to be substantially less than what will be found in proposed regional district.

**Lessons Learned.** Applicable to San Diego is Orange County's operating approach, dividing its service area into 5 geographical divisions, and establishing 5 – 9 stations as a battalion, each headed by a battalion chief. This is a useful model for San Diego to follow.

San Diego has a much more difficult challenge funding its proposed regional district than Orange County. It will need to be creative in securing money to support this proposed district, and examine ways to reduce its costs, while at the same time improving service levels. This will likely mean more use of volunteers than that found in Orange County, and the identification of a revenue source that will make up for the meager property tax revenue found within the proposed regional district.

### **Riverside County**

Unlike the Orange County J.P.A., Riverside County has contracted with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) for fire protection services since 1921. The present Riverside/CDF contract began in 1946. Currently, the county fire department provides fire protection services to all of unincorporated areas of the county, 16 cities and one fire protection district, which contract with the county for services.

The department oversees 91 fire stations, with 45 stations owned by the county, 9 owned by the state, 31 owned by the cities, and six run by volunteers. Firefighters from some stations respond to cities, some respond to unincorporated areas, and some respond to both. Overall, the department serves approximately 1,300,000 people, and covers 7,004 square miles.

In terms of staffing, CDF provides the county 952 professional firefighters, with slightly over one-half of these positions attributed to the unincorporated areas. In addition, there are 65 volunteer fire companies, with six exclusive volunteer stations, with over 1,100 volunteer firefighters.

The contract between Riverside and CDF is approximately \$95 million for the current year. That amount does not include 27 positions provided by CDF for administrative oversight, and 130 county employees provided by Riverside for administrative and operational support of the county fire department.

The revenue to support this department entails very little direct support from property taxes. Revenue in the amount of \$59 million comes from “structural fire taxes,” which are taxes that have been approved in individual communities. Also, roughly \$28 million is supplied by the County’s General Fund, with nearly an additional \$8 million provided from the county sales tax (Prop. 172). City contracts for County fire service are in addition to these contract and revenue amounts. Total revenue budgeted for FY 2006-07 is \$204.9 million.

**Lessons Learned.** Similar to Orange County, Riverside County also divides their service area into divisions, with a battalion chief responsible for several fire stations. Again, this would be a useful model to be followed in San Diego.

In addition, San Diego will have a difficult time funding its proposed regional district compared to Riverside. It does not have the “structural fire tax” base found in Riverside, nor does it have a number of contracting cities to help support a large countywide fire suppression function. Finally, the use of Proposition 172 funds, while permitted by law and authorized to support the county fire department in Riverside, appears from a policy perspective to be committed solely for sheriff, district attorney and probation functions in San Diego County.

Riverside County has a much more substantial volunteer firefighter program than Orange County. It is much larger in scope, and is well organized with well spelled out policies and procedures. Since the proposed regional fire district in San Diego County will also need to use a significant number of volunteers, the policies and procedures developed in Riverside County will be useful to the regional entities’ operations.

### **Sacramento County**

While not located in Southern California, this county operation was picked for study because it is large and is served by a fire protection district, unlike Orange County

(J.P.A.) or Riverside County (county fire department). The Sacramento Metropolitan Fire District historically was created from 16 predecessor fire agencies. It provides services through 42 fire stations, with 750 uniformed and support personnel to nearly 600,000 people in a 417 square mile area.

The district was created as an independent special fire district under the Fire Districts Law of 1987. The district was established in 1989 with the consolidation of the Rancho Cordova and Citrus Heights Fire Protection Districts. It then reorganized with the Fair Oaks Fire Protection District. Unlike what is being proposed in San Diego, however, this district serves primarily a suburban area.

Sacramento Metro had a FY 2005-06 operating budget of approximately \$130 million with a total budget, including its capital program, of nearly \$143 million (\$149 million in FY 2006-07). Its main source of revenue was from its share of property taxes in FY 2005-06, amounting to \$111.7 million (\$126 million in FY 2006-07), charges for services (\$12.9 million), and revenue from other governmental agencies (\$5.7 million).

This district also divides its operations by region, and uses the battalion model for overseeing its 42 fire stations.

**Lessons learned.** Using the battalion model for administering its fire stations, similar to the practice in Riverside and Orange Counties, provides additional support to the proposal in this report to divide its operations by division. Establishing 5 – 9 stations as a unit, with the unit headed by a battalion chief, is a useful model for San Diego to follow.

Again, San Diego does not have the property tax structure that is available to Sacramento Metro. This will make it very difficult for San Diego to provide the level of service found in Sacramento, or the other counties discussed in this report for that matter, without identifying another source of revenue and/or reducing its potential operating costs.

The fact that Sacramento Metro is a regional fire district, provides proof that a regional district, such as the one proposed in San Diego, can be successful in providing fire and emergency services to a large service area as long as there is sufficient financial support for its operation.

### **San Bernardino County**

The current San Bernardino County Fire Department consists of involving 32 separate entities, including 9 county service areas (CSAs), 13 improvement zones within those CSAs, 5 fire protection districts, and 5 ambulance areas. The formation of these districts dates back to 1949, with the establishment of the Yucca Valley Fire Protection District. Other districts, including those with multiple powers, including firepowers, were created between 1950 through 1980. Then in 1982, an initial consolidation of Board-governed fire protection districts and CSAs was accomplished with the creation of a single fire chief as part of CSA 70 (Fire Administration). In 1985, four fire protection districts were added, establishing the County Fire Agency.

Initially, San Bernardino contracted with CDF to provide fire service in various parts of the county. That arrangement continued through 1994, when the County initiated a full management consolidation that brought all fire protection districts, CSAs (with one exception) and CSA improvement zones under the administrative oversight of CSA 70. By 1997, however, the County began moving away from their CDF contract, and transferring responsibility for portions of the County fire responsibilities to the Fire Department. This transfer was completed in 1999, when all Board-governed fire districts and CSAs were placed under the authority of the County Fire Department. At the time of this change, cities that previously had been served through the county, such as the cities of Highland and Yucaipa, decided to detach from CSA 38 and to contract directly with CDF for fire service. Still, the county fire department provides contract services to three cities, and also serves three other cities that are overlaid by a fire district. The state responsibility area is still served by CDF.

After a study showed that several of the smaller, rural districts would fail financially in the near term, the County petitioned San Bernardino LAFCO to create a countywide fire protection district. The proposal is to annex all of its territory into an expanded Yucca Valley Fire Protection District, which has the most latent powers, expand it, and rename it the San Bernardino County Consolidated Fire District. Within this new district will be the creation of four primary improvement zones to receive the operating revenues from fire protection districts and CSAs that are being dissolved by the reorganization. The four improvement districts are: North Desert, South Desert, Valley, and Mountain.

Special tax improvement districts also were created within the Fire Protection District creating 12 improvement districts altogether. The special tax improvement districts were established since the special taxes cannot be used beyond the boundaries of the single improvement district from which they are collected. These special taxes will continue the funding of specialized services, such as paramedic services, for a particular area or community.

As was pointed out in the San Bernardino County Consolidated Fire District Reorganization Proposal to San Bernardino LAFCO, "By law, these communities (which have implemented special taxes for fire/emergency medical services) must continue to have the special tax revenues protected through the establishment of improvement districts within the new parent district." Since special taxes cannot be utilized outside the area in which they are generated, there is a need to create a mechanism to identify the territory in which they are collected, thereby creating special tax improvement districts. The mechanism for creating these districts or zones are more fully described in Government Code Section 56125.

The budget for this department is approximately \$134 million. The revenue for this department is primarily through property taxes, other governments, and fee for service.

This budget supports a department of 63 fire stations, with 286 career firefighters, 66 limited term firefighters, 548 paid call firefighters and 210 support staff. The Department

serves 328,260 people and 16,225 square miles. They have 86 engines, and share the use of 4 helicopters with the Sheriff's Department.

The original 32 FPD and CSAs, which will be reorganized into the San Bernardino County Consolidated Fire District, are all board governed. As a result, the governing board of the new regional district will continue to be the Board of Supervisors.

While there was an initial staff proposal to create an advisory board for each of the four improvement zones, later it was decided to create just one fire advisory board. Still, this report concludes that there is a positive rationale for creating, in the case of San Diego, fire advisory boards representing distinct geographic areas to provide knowledgeable input to the elected board of directors of the proposed regional fire district.

There are several advantages in consolidating 32 fire entities into one fire protection district as identified in the San Bernardino County LAFCO proposal. They included:

- Greater efficiency by providing the most effective means for streamlining the delivery of service;
- Simplifies budgeting, fiscal operations;
- Greater flexibility in the use of Department resources and assets;
- More effective use of executive management;
- The proposed consolidation would help some fire districts financially by including them in a larger regional funding base;
- By maintaining a separate fire protection district, the separate legal liability from the County will be maintained;
- A single fire protection district best accommodates special tax election initiatives for fire protection service;
- As a residual benefit, the proposal "clarifies the structure and operation of the County Fire Department for the general public."

**Lessons learned.** Again as with the other county examples, the proposed regional fire district in San Diego does not have the tax base experienced in San Bernardino County. However, San Bernardino has significant financial challenges since many of the FPD and CSAs being consolidated into the new, larger district are rural without any substantial tax base. The consolidation now being processed by San Bernardino LAFCO will only postpone the inevitable fact that total revenues, and revenue growth within the district, will not continue to support the current level of fire service. The new district likely will run a deficit within the next several years. One lesson learned, therefore, is that the proposed regional fire district in San Diego must develop a stable revenue stream, and that revenue must be able to grow to meet the needs of the district over time.

Another applicable lesson is that the special taxes and assessments collected in specific geographical areas of the proposed district must be spent in those areas, and for the purpose for which they were authorized. One way to assure conformance with state law is by creating improvement zones or districts within the regional fire protection district in accordance with the procedure outlined in Government Code Section 56125.

San Bernardino County perceives that there are a number of advantages in consolidating several fire protection districts and CSAs into one fire protection district, including, as just mentioned, a more efficient, streamlined organization and operation, greater flexibility in the use of personnel and assets, consolidation of districts into a larger fiscal base, protection of special assessments or taxes to insure that revenues from these taxes will be spent in the community in which they originated, and the continued separation of the fire function from the County, protecting the County from potential liability exposure.

### **Summary of Lessons Learned**

A summary of lessons learned from the other counties examined in this report include are as follows.

1. A fire district governance structure can be successful in overseeing a regional fire protection district, if sufficient funding is available for the district's operation. This is demonstrated by the Sacramento Metro District.
2. A sufficient ongoing revenue stream to support the operations of a regional fire protection system in San Diego County will be necessary to compensate for the lack of on going property tax revenue compared to that found in the other counties studied in this report.
3. The organizational structure of a regional fire protection entity in San Diego County should include improvement zones for the collection and expenditure of approved special taxes and assessments found in distinct communities or areas within the organization. This is similar to the treatment of such special taxes and assessments in San Bernardino County.
4. The proposal in this report to divide the proposed regional entity into operational divisions headed by Battalion Chiefs is supported by the practice of all of the other counties studied in this report.
5. While San Bernardino eventually will create just one volunteer advisory committee for their proposed County Consolidated Fire District, their original proposal to create an advisory committee for each operational division of their new district would have significant advantages in San Diego County, as discussed in the Governance section of this report.
6. An aggressive and comprehensive volunteer program will help the operational and financial success of the proposed district. Riverside County is an example of the success of a well-organized volunteer program.
7. Consolidation of several fire protection districts, CSAs and other fire entities as proposed in this report have a number of advantages and should be pursued. These advantages include creating a more efficient, streamlined organization and operation, greater flexibility in the use of personal and assets, and developing a larger financial base to support the fire service.
8. Further, a consolidated regional fire entity helps clarify the structure and operation of regional fire protection for the general public.