

EMERGENCY MEDICAL AND FIRE SERVICE CHALLENGES IN CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

In May 2016, the Contra Costa Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) released its 2nd round Draft Municipal Service Review (MSR) of emergency medical and fire services in Contra Costa County. The report covers municipal service providers including three cities and eight special districts, and focuses on 1) updating data from the 1st round MSR (2009); 2) review of automatic and mutual aid agreements; and 3) concentration on the two most distressed fire districts - East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD) and Rodeo Hercules Fire Protection District (RHFPD), and the relationship of these focus agencies with Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (ConFire). The LAFCO MSR report is available online at http://www.conracostalafco.org/municipal_service_reviews.htm.

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE REPORT

- **FINANCES** - For the most part, Contra Costa County emergency medical and fire service providers have the financial ability to deliver appropriate service levels, with the exception of ECCFPD and RHFPD. The two districts suffer from a structural fiscal problem, in that they receive the lowest amount of property tax revenue, as compared to other fire service providers in the County. Since 2009, financial conditions have stabilized for most local agencies, with the exception of ECCFPD and RHFPD, due to their structural deficits.
- **GROWTH AND SERVICE DEMAND** - Continued population growth, job creation, and changes in health care services affect the volume and location of service calls, creating the need for new facilities and staff resources in order to sustain services. While recovery in real estate and development has benefits, it also has costs in terms of increases in service demands. Between 2015 and 2020, the cities of Hercules and Oakley are expected to see the highest annual growth rates in the County, with 1.7% and 1.6% respectively; these cities will also see a corresponding increase in service demand.
- **SERVICE LEVELS** - A majority of calls to which fire agencies respond are medical (over 72%). Many Contra Costa County fire service providers are unable to meet "best practices" for response times and staffing. In 2009 and still today, fire agencies are unable to meet national and state guidelines for fire response times 90% of the time. Response times have worsened for ECCFPD and RHFPD due to fiscal challenges, station closures, and staff reductions.
- **INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDS** - Nearly half of the fire stations in the County are over 40 years old and a significant number are in poor condition, needing repair or replacement.
- **ACCOUNTABILITY** - Most agencies demonstrated accountability based on standard measures such as transparency, contested elections, constituent outreach, and disclosure practices. ECCFPD suffers from several accountability issues due to lack of financial resources and having an appointed board instead of a directly elected board. RHFPD has experienced organization disruptions including staffing changes and board turnover.
- **GOVERNANCE OPTIONS** - In addition to enhanced revenue, boundary clean-ups, reorganization and/or consolidation could potentially improve long-term sustainability for ECCFPD and RHFPD.

HOW DO THESE ISSUES AFFECT THOSE WHO LIVE AND WORK IN AND VISIT CONTRA COSTA COUNTY

ECCFPD and RHFPD continue to suffer from a lack of sufficient funding, resulting in reduced fire and medical response services, including fire station closures and staffing reductions, despite continued increases in call volumes.

- **ECCFPD** fire and emergency medical services are inadequate and will result in increased risk to life and property
 - In 2010, ECCFPD operated with 8 fire stations; today it operates with 3 stations
 - In 2007, there were 4,600 fire/medical incidents in the ECCFPD; in 2014 there were 5,423 incidents
 - ECCFPD response times are excessive and far exceed industry standards⁽¹⁾. In 2007, ECCFPD responded to calls within 5:46 minutes half of the time and 9:36 minutes 90% of the time. Today, ECCFPD reports a response time of 11:58 minutes 90% of the time
 - ISO ratings for ECCFPD have increased from 4/9 to 4/10⁽²⁾; ISO ratings affect property owners' ability to obtain homeowners insurance and impact insurance rates
- **RHFPD** fire and emergency medical services are inadequate and will result in increased risk to life and property
 - RHFPD operates two fire stations; however, expiration of a federal grant and loss of benefit assessment revenue will result in the closure of one station
 - In 2007, there were 2,068 fire/medical incidents in the RHFPD; in 2014 there were 2,159 incidents
 - RHFPD response times are excessive and exceed industry standards. In 2007, RHFPD responded to calls within 5:24 minutes half of the time and 8:08 minutes 90% of the time. Today, RHFPD reports a response time of 9:43 minutes 90% of the time

HOW TO FIX SOME OF THE PROBLEMS

The MSR report identified the following fiscal and governance options to help address the critical fire and emergency medical service needs of ECCFPD and RHFPD

- ECCFPD and RHFPD should pursue new funding sources, including voter approved special taxes – educating the community on the need for professional fire and emergency medical services, and the nature of the funding crisis and how it came about is critical
- Land use agencies (i.e., County, cities) should assess/increase their development impact fees to fund facilities needed for fire and emergency medical services
- ECCFPD should elect an independent board of directors to enhance accountability to District constituents
- ECCFPD and RHFPD should develop long term service and funding plans
- RHFPD should pursue regional opportunities with other West County fire and emergency medical service providers, including creating a task force to implement a Standards of Cover (SOC) plan, apply for grants, refine operational practices and cooperative agreements, and collaborate on operational and organizational issues

Notes:

- (1) The National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA), an international non-profit organization, was established to increase fire and electrical safety. NFPA developed an industry standard (NFPA 1710) for the deployment of fire suppression operations to ensure safe and effective fire service operations. The Standard stipulates that the first fire engine should arrive to 90% of emergency calls within a range of 6:15 and 6:45 minutes. The standards are different for medical emergencies. Nationally, high performing EMS systems have a generally accepted response time goal of 8:59 minutes from onset to arrival at the scene.
- (2) The Insurance Services Office (ISO), an advisory organization, classifies fire service in communities from 1 to 10, indicating the general adequacy of coverage. Communities with the **best systems** for water distribution, fire department facilities, equipment and personnel, and fire alarms and communications receive a rating of 1.