



Legislation Text

File #: 19-0551, **Version:** 1

Fire and Emergency Medical Services ad hoc Committee recommending the Board receive and file a report on the committee's activities and provide direction related to the committee and staff participation in countywide fire district sustainability efforts. (Est. Time: 1 Hr.)

FUNDING: N/A

DISCUSSION / BACKGROUND

Fire and emergency medical (non-transport) services in El Dorado County are delivered by 13 special districts and the City of South Lake Tahoe. The 13 special districts have nearly 50 stations countywide, of which approximately 20 are staffed full-time by paid firefighters. In total, the districts employ nearly 200 firefighters and chief officers. Total property tax revenues to the districts are approximately \$41 million. Several districts have special taxes or benefit assessments that bring in an additional \$2.5 million. Due to the effects of Proposition 13, these resources are not spread evenly among districts, resulting in varying service levels throughout the county. The inequities are particularly apparent in rural areas, where the districts' share of local property taxes is very low due to a combination of factors. Some of these agencies had very low tax rates prior to passage of Proposition 13 because they relied heavily on volunteers. The formula for allocating the local share of property taxes post-Proposition 13 memorialized those low tax rates. The more rural areas of the county typically have lower total assessed value because the housing is less dense and home prices are often lower as one travels farther from infrastructure and services. The result is a low tax rate on a low tax base. As population in the rural areas has grown, the demand for fire services has increased. The cost of delivering fire services has grown as regulations and the county's demographics have made it nearly impossible to run a volunteer-based fire department.

The challenges related to securing sustainable funding for fire and emergency services are not unique to El Dorado County. A little over two years ago, the Board established an ad hoc committee to work with staff and fire districts to explore ways to sustain the high quality fire and emergency medical services we enjoy in El Dorado County. Those efforts first focused on the two County Service Areas that provide ambulance services. It was determined that the CSAs, with some adjustments to the contract with Cal Tahoe Emergency Services Operations Authority in CSA 3, would be stable for the short term. Efforts turned back to the fire districts themselves. A lot of effort was put into researching the feasibility of a sales tax to support fire and emergency services. This tax would have required support of two-thirds of the voters. Polling showed that such a tax was not likely to pass. In light of that, some districts have chosen to pursue the idea of initiatives for taxes within their own territories.

The 2017-18 Grand Jury issued a report that recommended consolidation, and recommended that

the County lead such an effort. The Board of Supervisors' response agreed that consolidation should be considered as one of the potential options for shoring up districts, but stopped short of adopting the recommendation that the Board direct creation of a plan to consolidate districts. Rather, it was determined that the Ad Hoc Committee should continue its work with the fire districts on sustainability.

Last December, the CAO and the Ad Hoc Committee met with several of the West Slope districts whose chiefs had either recently retired or were planning to retire to discuss opportunities for district reorganizations. That group indicated a willingness to explore the idea of reorganization. A few districts were already in discussions regarding annexations or consolidations.

The Ad Hoc Committee is encouraged by the districts' enthusiasm to find solutions; however, it is not entirely clear what role the County should play in this process. The districts and their elected boards are accountable to their residents; however, each district is part of the countywide system of fire service delivery. The districts rely on each other heavily and all residents of the county rely on the districts' ability to work together.

The committee would like to provide some level of support to fire service sustainability efforts. The County's own fiscal constraints preclude offering ongoing general fund support such as the "aid to fire" provided in previous years. In addition, such support would not address the structural problems facing the fire service. Several ideas have been discussed, including one-time financial assistance with the costs of the LAFCO reorganization process and financial assistance with infrastructure improvements that would increase efficiencies in the system. The Committee believes discussions should focus on looking at the fire service from a countywide, system-wide perspective and any assistance from the County should support increased coordination and efficiency. The committee and staff have encouraged districts to work together and think creatively to identify solutions. Such discussions can be more productive if the districts have regular contact with the committee or County staff to help vet the viability of certain ideas and to provide accurate fiscal information for analysis. The Committee recommends that the Board authorize the CAO to provide staff resources as needed to assist districts in their efforts. Such assistance may include fiscal analysis, attendance at meetings, and coordination of other County departments and agencies in research and discussion of alternatives. The idea is not to lead the effort, but to inform and provide support to the efforts led by the districts.

ALTERNATIVES

N/A

PRIOR BOARD ACTION

N/A

OTHER DEPARTMENT / AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

N/A

CAO RECOMMENDATION / COMMENTS

Approve as recommended

FINANCIAL IMPACT

There is no direct fiscal impact; any proposals from districts will be brought to the Board for consideration. The CAO will manage staff so that time spent on these activities does not unreasonably interfere with other priorities.

CLERK OF THE BOARD FOLLOW UP ACTIONS

N/A

STRATEGIC PLAN COMPONENT

Public Safety

CONTACT

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