



East Contra Costa Fire Protection District

Brian Helmick, Fire Chief

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Brian Oftedal,
President
Stephen Smith,
Vice President
Adam Langro
Carrie Nash
Joe Young

September 10, 2020

Anne N. Granlund
Civil Grand Jury – Foreperson
725 Court Street
P.O. Box 431
Martinez, CA 94553-0091

Re: Civil Grand Jury Report on Wildfire Preparedness in Contra Costa County

Dear Ms. Granlund:

I am writing on behalf of the Board of Directors (Board) of the East Contra Costa Fire Protection District (ECCFPD). This letter will serve as ECCFPD's formal response to the Contra Costa Grand Jury's June 8, 2020 report entitled "Wildfire Preparedness in Contra Costa County." ECCFPD's Board reviewed and approved (on September 9, 2020) this response to the Grand Jury report's nine findings (numbered F1-F9) and four of the Grand Jury's seven recommendations which pertain to ECCFPD (R1-R4).

For context, it is important to note that ECCFPD provides firefighting and prevention, emergency medical services (basic life support) and hazardous waste response. We serve 249 square miles in eastern Contra Costa County including the Cities of Brentwood and Oakley, and the communities of Discovery Bay, Bethel Island, Knightsen, Byron, Marsh Creek, and Morgan Territory. ECCFPD was formed in November 2002 by combining the Bethel Island Fire District, the East Diablo Fire District, and the Oakley Fire District. It is governed by a five member elected board of directors.

Findings

ECCFPD generally agrees with findings F1-F8 except to the extent that ECCFPD cannot speak to the other fire protection agencies' activities and capabilities. Relative to F9, ECCFPD agrees that fire station operations and staffing levels currently are lower than they were in 2008. In 2008, ECCFPD operated eight stations with 18 fire fighters on-duty at any given time, whereas ECCFPD currently operates three stations with a total of nine fire protection personnel on-duty at any given time.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury requested that ECCFPD respond to the following four recommendations:

R1. The Board of Directors of Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District, and San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District should consider directing their Fire Chief to update wildfire evacuation plans and incorporate pre-determined polygons and advanced routing technology, by June 30, 2021.



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The recommendation has not been implemented, but will be implemented in 2021. Collectively, the Contra Costa County Fire Chiefs Association supported a grant application to provide funding for the procurement and implementation of a software program that will provide a uniform evacuation planning platform. The \$300,000 grant was approved in late 2019 with funding to be available in late 2020. Contra Costa County Fire Protection District is the lead agency for this project and expects to commence procurement in late 2020 with implementation scheduled in mid-2021. The software will satisfy the recommendation included in this report.

R2. The Board of Directors of Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, Moraga-Orinda Fire Protection District, Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District, and San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District should consider identifying funds to adopt or expand the use of new technologies, such as ground sensors, drones, satellites, and fire spotting cameras, to help detect fires in high-risk areas, by June 30, 2021.

This recommendation will not be implemented because ECCFPD suffers from a severe lack of personnel and funds for basic prevention and firefighting services and cannot undertake efforts to expand the use of new technologies. ECCFPD runs over 7700 calls for service per year and simply does not have the personnel to dedicate to accomplish these types of projects. ECCFPD recently had to take the drastic steps of cutting back the number of fire engines it sends to emergencies and cancelling a wide range of public outreach activities, such as fire station open houses, due to the lack of personnel. While the recommendations are worthy and would help with fire prevention, until ECCFPD has more personnel and permanent funding, ECCFPD simply cannot undertake such projects with its limited financial resources and limited personnel.

R3. The East Contra Costa Fire Protection District Board of Directors should consider identifying options to fund additional fire stations and staff to restore fire services to pre-2008 levels, by June 30, 2021.

This recommendation has already been implemented, and ECCFPD is now seeking additional funding sources. ECCFPD is already receiving the same amount of funding as in 2008, but those funding levels were insufficient even in 2008, and are dramatically inadequate now. The appropriate standard to strive to achieve is the National Fire Protection Association's recommended levels, not the pre-2008 levels of staffing and funding as those were still inadequate.

As is the case for fire districts generally, almost all of ECCFPD's funding (96%) comes from a fixed portion of the 1% property taxes collected by the County based on assessed valuation of parcels in ECCFPD's service area.

After the County collects property taxes, the revenue is divided among the agencies serving each property, including the county itself, cities, and school districts, based on a formula set by State law. ECCFPD receives an average of 7% of the County's property taxes from the parcels in its service area. This is substantially less than for other comparable, nearby fire districts. For example, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District receives 12% and the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District receives 14%.



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This difference results from a State law that divided up property taxes based on community services provided in the late 1970's. At that time, ECCFPD's service area was largely rural, with lower needs for emergency services, and the community's fire protection was provided by volunteer and paid-on-call departments with extremely low costs. Over the next 40+ years, the community has become more populated and developed, requiring that fire service be provided by professional firefighters. Unfortunately, though, the formula for distributing property taxes remains the same, and changing it to better fund fire and emergency services would require passing new State law. This would be very difficult to accomplish, as it would take money away from counties, cities and schools.

ECCFPD has explored a variety of ways to secure additional funding.

- **State law:** The property tax formulas which harm ECCFPD are a problem with State law. The California Constitution would require a 2/3 vote of the Legislature to change the rules. ECCFPD does not view this as a feasible solution. Also, redirecting property tax revenues would reduce funds for other public agencies like cities and schools.
- **Local revenue measures:** ECCFPD and cities in the community have unsuccessfully proposed three types of revenue measures to fund fire protection services:
 - In June 2012, ECCFPD voters rejected a parcel tax.
 - In April 2015, ECCFPD's property owners protested (and thereby halted ECCFPD from implementing) a benefit assessment through a property-owner Proposition 218-governed process.
 - In November 2016, Brentwood and Oakley voters voted down a utility tax, the revenues from which would have been available to fund public safety.
- **Grant funding:** In November 2012, ECCFPD received a \$7.8 million grant under the federal Staffing for Adequate Fire & Emergency Response (SAFER) program, which allowed it to hire or rehire 18 firefighters and reopen 2 closed fire stations. After the SAFER grant funding expired in November of 2014, ECCFPD had to lay off the additional firefighters.
- **Consolidation:** ECCFPD has investigated mergers with other fire protection agencies. However, consolidation is not possible while ECCFPD has insufficient funding to serve its service area. (Other agencies previously indicated that ECCFPD would have been a drain on their resources rather than a benefit to the services provided in their jurisdictions or the ECCFPD service area.)

Now, ECCFPD has a three-pronged approach to addressing its funding issues.

1. ECCFPD is exploring the feasibility of a ballot measure or benefit assessment to provide guaranteed, stable and dedicated funding for fire protection and emergency response services.
2. To address new growth, ECCFPD is working with the City of Brentwood, the City of Oakley, and Contra Costa County to update their development impact fees. This will require new developments to pay for equipment and buildings used to provide fire and emergency services.
3. Where possible, ECCFPD also is pursuing mechanisms for new development to join a community facilities district (CFD) and pay a special tax that will cover the operating costs of providing service to that development.

More information on the above can be found in ECCFPD's Strategic Plan, Implementation Action Plan and Revenue Options Guide, all of which are posted online at <https://www.eccfpd.org/eccfpd-strategic-planning>.



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R4. The Board of Directors of Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District, Moraga-Orinda Fire Protection District, and Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District should review and consider mechanisms, such as the ordinance passed by the San Ramon Valley Fire Protection District, that would enable their fire district to recover labor and equipment costs from PG&E for overseeing electrical utility work that presents a high fire risk, by June 30, 2021.

This recommendation requires further analysis as the San Ramon Valley Protection District ordinance is the subject of pending litigation filed by PG&E. ECCFPD will not provide a timeline for a decision on whether to pursue this recommendation until later in, or after, the pending legal proceeding.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to your report; I trust you will find our comments helpful.

Sincerely,

DocuSigned by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Helmick'.

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Brian Helmick

Fire Chief, East Contra Costa Fire Protection District

cc: Board of Directors
via email as a Word document to: ctadmin@contracosta.courts.ca.gov