

KEY POINTS FROM SOUTH COUNTY FIRE SERVICE STUDY PUBLIC REVIEW DRAFT DATED MAY 2007

CURRENT SERVICE

1. The Watsonville City Fire Department, the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District, County Service Area 4 (Pajaro Dunes), and County Fire/CAL FIRE are working together to provide coordinated responses to fires, medical emergencies, and other emergencies in the South County.
2. The current agencies are based in 5 staffed stations and respond with 6 full-time companies (5 engine companies and 1 truck company). Volunteers supplement the response from two stations (Corralitos and Pajaro Dunes) and provide the primary response from one station (Mt. Madonna). Also, an additional engine company is based in Corralitos during the summer fire season.
3. The Watsonville Fire Department and the County Fire/CAL FIRE staff their stations with 3-person companies. Pajaro Dunes and the Pajaro Valley Fire Protection District staff their stations with 2-person companies.
4. The City of Watsonville has an Advanced Life Support response (paramedic) from each of its stations. The other agencies respond with Basic Life Support (emergency medical technician).
5. Under contract with the County, the ambulance provider (AMR West) bases only one ambulance in the Pajaro Valley. * This puts great reliance on the emergency medical services provided by the fire agencies.
6. The Corralitos CAL FIRE companies are subsidized by State wildland funding and get sent to wildland fires outside of the Pajaro Valley. This requires back-up coverage by other local units.
7. There are two dispatch systems. The Santa Cruz Consolidated Emergency Communication Center (SCCECC) receives all calls and dispatches the Watsonville City Fire Department. The SCCECC transfers CAL FIRE calls to the CAL FIRE communications center, which dispatches CAL FIRE units. The transfer time between the two centers is approximately 20 seconds.

COSTS OF ALTERNATIVES

8. The collective cost for the four agencies to operate in the South County is \$9.0 million dollars per year.
9. To upgrade all stations to safer 3-person companies and a paramedic response would result in a collective cost of \$9.6 million dollars per year under the status quo 4-agency organization model.
10. The study estimates that a single, consolidated fire agency would have a \$9.9 million dollar budget to provide the higher service level with a 72-hour workweek such as utilized by CAL FIRE. The 3% difference in cost between the improved service/status quo model and the improved service/consolidated agency model is not materially significant, and the two options could be considered equivalent in cost.
11. For the consolidated agency model, the alternative where CAL FIRE is the contractor is significantly less expensive than the alternative where the Watsonville Fire Department is the operator. This is largely due to the difference between CAL FIRE's 72-hour workweek and the 56-hour workweek utilized by the City and most of the fire protection districts in Santa Cruz County.
12. The consolidated district/Watsonville-operated alternative (1B) is a surrogate for an alternative that was not separately analyzed in the study: a consolidated district operated by its own staff on a 56-hour workweek. An independently staffed district is likely to have the same high cost level as the Watsonville-operated alternative.

HIGHER LEVELS OF SERVICE

13. Under both alternatives (CAL FIRE and Watsonville City) of the consolidated agency model, the Corralitos unit would be a "dedicated company," meaning that CAL FIRE would not dispatch it to wildland fires elsewhere in the state. This would reduce the time periods during which emergency responses to the Corralitos area come from outside Corralitos.
14. Improving staffing and level of service to 3-person ALS (paramedic) outside the City will result in safer working conditions for the firefighters and a higher level of fire and medical services for the residents. The property owners and residents inside the City will benefit indirectly from the stronger rural companies that respond into the City.
15. Consolidating into a single South County Fire Agency would yield operational benefits over the current system. The benefits involve training, dispatch, and movement of resources.

REORGANIZATION PROCESS AND DETAILS

16. Under the allocation model used in this study, the current cost of providing service to the Corralitos response area of County Service Area 48 (County Fire) is approximately \$785,000. The CSA 48 revenue generated in that response area is approximately \$837,000.
17. In a consolidation involving the City of Watsonville, the current principal funding source is the general fund (\$4.8 million per year). By operation of State law, only an estimated \$683,000 in property taxes would transfer to the consolidated agency. So, approximately \$4.1 million in revenue would be needed in replacement revenue.
18. If two or more agencies decide to analyze whether to consolidate, they should take particular care to design a revenue base that supports the planned levels of service and accounts for the different funding structures of each current agency. The agencies have significantly different revenue structures. Three have fire suppression assessments that charge a single-family property owner these varied rates: Pajaro Valley FPD \$30, County Fire \$111, and Pajaro Dunes \$649.
19. County Fire (County Service Area 48) has identified a funding shortfall to maintain the current levels of service within CSA 48, which include the Summit, Bonny Doon, Davenport, and many other rural areas of the County. This shortfall, the loss of Corralitos revenues if it becomes part of a consolidated south county district, and loss of Bonny Doon revenues if it forms a new fire protection district will need careful analysis by the County and LAFCO to protect against degrading services in the remaining portions of CSA 48.

* Point 5 was drafted based upon the Public Review Draft circulated in advance of LAFCO's June 6, 2007 public hearing on that document. Santa Cruz County's ambulance provider, AMR West, commented on the record of that hearing that they meet their performance responsibilities through sub-contracting with the City of Watsonville Fire Department for Advanced Life Support response and by moving AMR ambulances in from other areas of the County when the Pajaro Valley-based AMR ambulance is busy.