

Guest Commentary | Support CSA 48 Santa Cruz County Fire Assessment

By Pat McCormick

For more than 35 years, until I retired earlier this year, I was the executive officer of the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO), at which one of my duties was to evaluate efficiency and reorganization options for the fire agencies in Santa Cruz County. I am writing to support the proposal being conducted by mail-in ballot in County Service Area 48 (CSA 48) to increase fire and emergency response assessments. CSA 48 pays for our Santa Cruz County Fire Department Volunteers and for CAL FIRE to operate paid companies outside the declared fire season in more than half the land area of the county, almost 300 square miles. The affected communities, with a population of approximately 24,000, include Davenport, Bonny Doon, South Skyline, Las Cumbres, Summit, Loma Prieta, and Corralitos. The Santa Cruz County Fire Volunteers and CAL FIRE companies respond to more than 2,200 incidents a year—medical emergencies, vehicle accidents, wildland fires, structure fires, and other emergencies.

The main funding sources for CSA 48 are property taxes and a fire assessment. The property tax share is set by a state formula enacted following Proposition 13 in the 1970s. The current assessments were last set by a landowner ballot in 1997 that created CSA 48 to help fund fire and emergency services in rural Santa Cruz County. The assessment levels vary based upon the fire flow demand, with a typical house paying \$159.56 per year. Fire assessments are common in rural areas with low tax bases.

Most people aware of CSA 48 operations and financing agree that more financial support is needed to bring the service level up. The main disagreement is whether to pass an increased assessment or whether to attempt to pressure the County Supervisors to reallocate some of its Proposition 172 funds from law enforcement to fire protection.

In a state fiscal crisis in 1992, the State of California took a radical action to permanently seize a significant portion of the local property taxes that were being disbursed to special districts, cities, and counties and to shift the funds to schools and community colleges. The counties were hurt the most. The state then gave the negatively-affected agencies a chance to recover a portion of the lost revenues by placing Proposition 172 on the 1993 ballot to raise the state sales tax 0.5% to support public safety. The measure passed, but the sales tax did not make the affected agencies whole. Typically, the sales tax paid back \$0.65 for every \$1 lost.

The disbursement method for the sales taxes is that the State sends a check to the County, and the County Board of Supervisors divides the funds to public safety entities. While some counties distribute a portion of the sales tax to fire agencies, it is typical in many counties that fire agencies do not benefit.

The fire agencies in the County have previously asked the County for a larger share of Proposition 172 revenues. The County has given them less than \$100,000, but the votes have not been there to move additional amounts away from the Sheriff, Probation, and District

Attorney. Even in non-crisis periods, the County struggles to fund these vital public safety services. It is unrealistic to expect the County to shift funds to any fire agencies, including Santa Cruz County Fire. The proposed fire and emergency response assessment is calculated using four factors with a typical home being charged approximately \$150 more per year. The assessment would pay for additional staffing for Cal Fire stations during the non-fire season and replacement of an aging fleet of volunteer engines to ensure timely 911 responses. It can only be spent for fire and emergency services within the rural communities in which it is collected.

If you live in one of the affected communities, please take time during this busy season to look for the ballot in the mail, vote “YES,” and mail in the ballot so that it gets to the County Elections Department no later than Jan. 13. If you have lost your ballot or have questions please call the County at 831-454-3416.

Pat McCormick is a Santa Cruz resident.