

# **Solano County Fire Protection Districts**

## **2007-2008 Solano County Grand Jury**

### **Reason for Investigation**

Under the authority of Penal Code sections 925 and 933.5, the 2007-2008 Grand Jury elected to investigate the Solano County Fire Protection Districts. The Grand Jury focused on the operations, budgets, response times, number of personnel and types of equipment in each district.

### **Grand Jury Actions**

- Interviewed Fire Chiefs from Cordelia Fire Protection District, Dixon Fire Protection District, Montezuma Fire Protection District, Suisun Fire Protection District and Vacaville Fire Protection District
- Interviewed Local Agency Formation Commission Executive Director
- Interviewed Solano County Auditor-Controller
- Reviewed Solano County Inventory of Local Agencies, March 2004
- Reviewed the Insurance Services Office Inc. rating information
- Reviewed budget information from each Fire Protection District
- Reviewed Proposition 13 and implementing legislation
- Reviewed “What’s So Special About Special Districts? A Citizen’s Guide to Special Districts in California” Third Edition

### **Background**

Fire Protection Districts (Fire Districts) were created in rural Solano County as Special Districts. Special Districts are separate local government agencies formed within limited geographical boundaries to deliver a public service. Special Districts allow a group of citizens to purchase specific services.

Special Districts can be single or multi-function, enterprise or non-enterprise, or dependent or independent. A dependent district is governed by an existing legislative body, such as a city council or a board of supervisors. Independent special districts are those governed by an independent board of directors elected by the district’s voters or appointed to a fixed term of office by another governing body. They are all overseen by elected or appointed board members who live within a geographical boundary. There are currently 44 special districts in Solano County.

In Solano County, Fire Districts protect in excess of 850 square miles of unincorporated land and approximately 20,050 people. These Fire Districts depend heavily on dedicated volunteers, who selflessly donate time and effort to protect citizens in the District. On average, they respond to over 3,500 emergency calls in a year. Between 50 and 80 percent of these calls are for medical emergencies. The response time generally ranges from 5 to 45 minutes depending on the accessibility of the area.

The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Governmental Reorganization Act of 1985 gave the Local Agency Formation Commissions (LAFCO) the authority to review and approve changes of organization for most special districts in the County. This includes incorporations, district formations, annexations, detachments, consolidations and disincorporations.

Initially, the counties paid 100 percent of LAFCO's costs. In 2001, some cities, counties and special districts agreed to each pay one-third of the cost of the LAFCO. However, in Solano County, the cities pay 50 percent and the County pays 50 percent.

The Fire Protection District Law of 1987 governs all 386 fire districts in the state. There are six Fire Districts in Solano County. The primary source of funding for Fire Districts is property taxes. The tax rate varies for each Fire District based on how much each received in 1978 when Proposition 13 was passed. The actual dollar amount depends on the value of real property in each district.

For many years, the Fire Districts have provided fire protection to Solano County residents. As times changed, the Fire Districts started to provide emergency medical care as well. They also provide services to cities and other Fire Districts in Solano County and throughout the State under mutual aid and automatic aid agreements.

Over the years, the cities have annexed the more populated unincorporated areas into their own boundaries which resulted in the Fire Districts' tax base becoming smaller. To mitigate the impact of annexation, LAFCO has proposed changes to existing policy which would provide temporary funds to the Fire Districts to relieve the impact of the loss of funds.

Changes brought about by Proposition 13 reduced property tax revenue by about 50 percent and made it difficult to increase taxes. In addition, the State of California has diverted funds once available to local government, including Fire Districts, to schools. Several fire districts have gone to the voters seeking the approval of special assessments to compensate for the lost revenue. Only two Fire Districts in the County, Cordelia and Vacaville, have been successful in gaining voter approval for additional funds. These special assessments have helped to a limited degree.

Several Fire Districts have applied for grant money with limited success.

Each fire district must own specialized vehicles. These vehicles include Type 1 and Type 2 fire trucks that are primarily used to fight structure fires and Type 3 and Type 4 fire trucks that are primarily used for wildland fires. Water tenders, rescue vehicles, command vehicles and utility vehicles are also part of the districts' inventories. Currently, most of the Type 1 fire trucks used by the Fire Districts are older than 10 years and some are not able to respond to out-of-county mutual aid calls because of potential mechanical breakdown. The cost of a new Type 1 or Type 2 fire truck is between \$300,000 and \$350,000. The cost of a new Type 3 or Type 4 fire truck is between \$80,000 and \$120,000. These costs vary based on how the vehicle is equipped.

Most Fire Districts maintain their own vehicles to save money. However, in some cases they must send vehicles to a repair shop. The rising cost of fuel has also had a significant impact on budgets.

Each firefighter must have two types of protective clothing. The first type is used for fighting structural fires and the second type is used to fight wildland fires. The cost of this equipment can range from \$2,500 to \$3,000 per person.

Each Fire District contracts with the Solano County Sheriff's Office Dispatch Center for dispatch services. The Dispatch Center also provides dispatch services for police. With the exception of Dixon and Rio Vista, City Police Departments currently dispatch each city's fire department on

their own frequencies. Communication equipment is sometimes not compatible making it difficult to communicate when responding to a mutual aid call.

The Insurance Services Office, Inc. evaluates and rates fire protection provided in communities. It uses a rating system with a range of 1 to 10 to determine risk which is then used to set the cost of homeowner insurance. The rating schedule considers specific information about the fire department, the water supply and the types of property to evaluate risk. The availability of water accounts for 40 percent of the total rating while the availability of fire equipment accounts for 26 percent. The availability of firefighters accounts for 24 percent and the alarm system accounts for 10 percent.

### **Cordelia Fire Protection District**

The Cordelia Fire Protection District (CFPD) was created in 1932. It is the only fire district in Solano County that has an elected Board of Directors. CFPD protects 56 square miles and includes 3,000 residents. It has 4 paid staff and 51 volunteers. CFPD has an annual budget of \$685,398. CFPD is staffed 24 hours a day by paramedics.

### **Dixon Fire Protection District**

The Dixon Fire Protection District (DFPD) was established in 1928. In 1992, the DFPD entered into a cooperative agreement with the City of Dixon. Although the two departments operate under one Fire Chief, each is governed by a separate governing body. DFPD protects 320 square miles and approximately 2,500 rural residents. Both the City and District receive a higher level of service than each would receive independently. The District has 19 paid fire fighters, 6 volunteers and an annual budget of \$456,929. Eleven of the 19 fire fighters are paramedics.

### **East Vallejo Fire Protection District**

The East Vallejo Fire Protection District (EVFPD) was reorganized in 1994. Prior to this time, the agency had an independent Board of Directors. When all Board members resigned, the Solano County Board of Supervisors reorganized the District and the supervisors now serve as the EVFPD Board of Directors. This is the only Dependent Fire District. The District currently contracts with the City of Vallejo Fire Department for fire protection services at a rate of \$527,120 per year. EVFPD protects approximately 3,000 residents. The EVFPD has no staff, and no equipment.

### **Montezuma Fire Protection District**

The Montezuma Fire Protection District (MFPD) covers the eastern portion of the County and was formed in 1928. In 2007, the Ryer Island Fire Protection District was dissolved and those areas were annexed into the MFPD. MFPD protects approximately 200 square miles, 1,450 residents and has an annual budget of \$537,635. The District has three paid staff and 27 volunteers. There is one main station in Rio Vista and five satellite stations.

### **Suisun Fire Protection District**

The Suisun Fire Protection District (SFPD) was organized in 1935. It protects 3,800 residents and approximately 138 square miles outside the city limits of Fairfield and the City of Suisun City. In 1977, the Valley Fire District was incorporated into the SFPD and in the early 1980's the District expanded to include Grizzly Island and all the Suisun Marsh. At that time, the District exchanged territory with Cordelia and Montezuma Fire Districts to facilitate faster response times to certain areas. SFPD has one part time paid employee. There are 38 volunteers, including the Fire Chief and an annual budget of \$274,480.

## **Vacaville Fire Protection District**

The Vacaville Fire Protection District (VFPD) was established in 1946. The VFPD and the City of Vacaville Fire Department shared resources and a station until 1981. Because of growth in the two areas, they split. VFPD built a station on Vine Street in Vacaville. In 1986, the Vacaville and Elmira Fire Districts consolidated and formed one district. The VFPD now serves approximately 6,300 residents and covers 135 square miles. It has 6 full time employees and 70 volunteers. The annual budget is \$1,413,248.

## **Findings and Recommendations**

**Finding 1** - Funding for Fire Districts is limited. One of the most critical needs is for fire fighting vehicles.

**Recommendation 1a** - Fire Protection Districts and the Board of Supervisors should work together to identify funding sources for regular replacement of older vehicles. Provisions in the Government Code authorize additional funding sources.

**Recommendation 1b** - Fire Protection Districts and the Board of Supervisors should continue to explore cooperative opportunities to obtain additional funds through creative efforts such as grants.

**Finding 2** - Communication is often difficult because equipment and frequencies used by different fire fighting agencies are not compatible.

**Recommendation 2** - Fire Protection Districts, Cities, and the County should standardize and consolidate communications as soon as possible.

**Finding 3** - Dispatching is challenging because dispatchers also serve law enforcement agencies.

**Recommendation 3** - The Fire Districts, Cities and the County should explore options to develop a centralized Fire Dispatch.

## **Comments**

The Solano County Fire Protection Districts depend heavily on volunteers. These dedicated men and women donate their time and knowledge to provide fire protection and medical aid to the unincorporated areas of the County. The 2007-2008 Grand Jury commends the Fire District firefighters for their contributions.

Residents of Solano County Fire Protection Districts should be mindful of the fact that insurance companies use the availability of quality fire services including modern equipment as the basis for setting insurance rates. In order for the Fire Districts to continue the current level of services, it is vital that updated equipment be available.

## **Affected Agencies**

- Cordelia Fire Protection District
- Dixon Fire Protection District
- Montezuma Fire Protection District
- Suisun Fire Protection District
- Vacaville Fire Protection District
- East Vallejo Fire Protection District
- Solano County Local Agency Formation Commission
- Solano County Sheriff's Office
- Solano County Board of Supervisors
- City of Benicia
- City of Dixon
- City of Fairfield
- City of Rio Vista
- City of Suisun City
- City of Vacaville
- City of Vallejo