

Proposal Three:

Gold Ridge FPD/North Bay Fire, Inc., Six County Service Area 40 Territories and Monte Rio FPD

Proposal Outline:

The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, which as North Bay Fire, Inc. provides support services to the remaining Volunteer Fire Companies under contract to the County, has requested a sphere of influence amendment that would add the following territories and one agency:

- Lakeville Volunteer Fire Company
- San Antonio Volunteer Fire Company (inactive)
- Wilmar Volunteer Fire Company
- Two Rock Volunteer Fire Company
- Bloomfield Volunteer Fire Company (inactive)
- Valley Ford Volunteer Fire Company
- Bodega Volunteer Fire Company
- Camp Meeker Volunteer Fire Company
- Fort Ross Volunteer Fire Company
- Monte Rio Fire Protection District

(A map showing these territories is included on page 14 of the district's draft Plan for Service, included in this report. The map does not include the Monte Rio FPD territory.)

The district has secured a funding agreement from the County and is seeking to complete a reorganization of all the proposed territories by the close of the 2022/23 Fiscal Year.

Status of LAFCO Work Product

A Municipal Service Review was completed and adopted by the Commission for fifteen fire and emergency medical service providers in the west county region in 2019, which included seven of the ten territories that Gold Ridge FPD is seeking to add to its sphere of influence.

A Municipal Service Review of the remaining three volunteer fire companies in the southernmost portion of the County would need to be completed and adopted prior to preparation of a sphere of influence study. A sphere of influence study is necessary to make determinations in two categories not covered in a Municipal Service Review.

Status of District Proposal

At the urging of LAFCO staff, Gold Ridge FPD has prepared a draft Plan for Service (attached to this report. A Plan for Service is a requirement for a reorganization proposal. While a Plan for Service is not required for a Sphere of Influence study, staff believes that a Plan could support and inform a study.

In order to apply District special taxes (parcel taxes) on the proposed territories, which along with ongoing financial transfers from the County are needed to fund the proposed expansion, the District is seeking to complete a reorganization by June of 2023.

Staff Comment: SOI Criteria

Staff feels that the proposal does not align well with the sphere of influence amendment criteria, though also recognizes that alternatives are also problematic. The poor alignments include:

- Disregard for advanced life support/ambulance services from the City of Petaluma and the Sonoma County Fire District. The Plan elides the options of annexing a large portion of the proposed territory to the agency that provides ALS/ambulance service to it (Sonoma County Fire District) or provision of support funding to the City of Petaluma in the southern area.
- Poor operational fit for some of the territory, ignoring agencies that provide significant direct operational support (actual crew response). There is also concern regarding ownership and use of facilities that are in private hands or owned by volunteer associations.
- Perhaps poor financial viability, which cannot be properly assessed at this time based on the draft Plan for Services provided by the District. In particular, the lack of a staffing plan; a facility improvement, decommissioning, and relocation plan with accompanying financial projections; and a vehicle and equipment inventory with accompanying financial projections, makes evaluation of the overall financial viability of the proposal impossible.

Staff Comments of Draft Plan for Service

Staff has consulted with the District to provide review of the draft Plan for Service, although staff believes that the Plan has shortcomings with regard to:

Plan for Facilities/Ownership

The District lists fifteen buildings in the proposed area, not including the four facilities owned by the Monte Rio Fire Protection District. The facilities range from typical volunteer fire company stations (almost all without staff quarters) to vehicle storage buildings. Two of the VFCs also have community halls, and one has a former fire station that is now a commercial rental.

The District notes that as North Bay Fire, Inc. funding for some facility improvements has been granted over the past two years. (Funding has also been granted for a series of equipment and vehicle purchases; see below.)

However, although the District has identified many needed facility improvements, including the addition or upgrade of staffing quarters at some locations, it has not yet catalogued these or determined cost estimates for their completion. The District does note that some facilities may be closed or relocated based on a forthcoming “standards of coverage” analysis.

Lastly, and in staff’s mind crucially for this category, the facilities have a range of ownerships including the Volunteer Fire Companies themselves (as associations), and individuals owning the property where the facilities are sited.

Staff notes that LAFCO has no authority to order the transfer of ownership of any of the sites, other than those owned by Monte Rio Fire Protection District, to Gold Ridge as part of a reorganization.

Staff has been kept informed of an issue with regard to private property transfers in the case of Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District. After an annexation of the territory once served by the Knights Valley Volunteer Fire Company (which served a portion of County Service Area 40) NSCFPD was initially not granted access to the Knights Valley fire house. Under this circumstance, NSCFPD was unable to use the facility for storage of any of its vehicles both because it was denied use of the facility by the Volunteer Company association, but also due to insurance requirements. (Insurers will not allow storage of agency vehicles in facilities that are not owned or legally controlled by the agency.)

Given the crucial nature of this issue, staff believes that the District should endeavor to have property transfer or lease agreements in place with the over a dozen property owners prior to seeking a reorganization. This would clearly be an onerous condition to the District given the timeframe it is proposing for a reorganization.

Staffing Plan

The District notes in its draft Plan for Service that additional staffing will be required for the reorganized district, not only for including additional firefighters, but to support a dedicated training bureau, fire prevention programs, community education, and fire investigation. The Plan notes that the additional staffing will be phased in as revenue becomes available, and after facilities are improved to house staffing.

The District also notes a plan to expand stipend shifts to all stations to continue to decrease incident response times.

Staff notes that these plans are not specific, and do not include any costs estimates.

Vehicle and Equipment Schedule and Management Plan

The District's draft Plan for Service does not include a vehicle and equipment inventory and a corresponding capital and maintenance plan, with projected cost levels.

Advanced Life Support/Ambulance Provider Contributions

The District clearly notes that it has no intention of providing financial support to the two public agencies, Sonoma County Fire District and the City of Petaluma's Fire Department, that provide advanced life support/ambulance coverage to the entirety of the territories under consideration.

Staff believes that the optimum adjudication of sphere of influence amendments would place the territories within the agencies providing advanced life support services, as these are crucial in meeting community needs. A secondary option would be for an agency to provide appropriate ongoing financial support to the agency or agencies providing this service. The Gold Ridge Plan for Service elides either of these options.

All of the territories from Bloomfield VFC north to Ft. Ross VFC are in Sonoma County Fire District's exclusive ambulance service territory, and Sonoma County FD provides services to those areas. Therefore, the areas could be annexed to Sonoma County Fire.

The City of Petaluma cannot annex the volunteer territories in the southern portion of the County, so only a financial transfer agreement would work.

Response Time and Service Levels

The District's Plan for Service needs further work to describe existing and projected response times, preferably on a territory-by-territory basis.

Options for Other SOI Alignments

Staff notes at least three alternative scenarios for establishing spheres of influence for the proposed areas:

1. Sonoma County Fire District could have the territories within its existing ambulance service area added to its sphere of influence, recognizing a better overall fit with the SOI criteria. (Staff notes that the Camp Meeker VFC territory is somewhat "in limbo", as the ambulance service provider in that area has ceased services. The territory may be part of the "Exclusive Operating Area" that the County's EMS agency oversees.)
2. Gold Ridge FPD could have the southern areas (Two Rock to Lakeville) added to its sphere of influence. Staff believes that an eventual reorganization based on this alignment should include a financial support agreement with the City of Petaluma for provision of ALS/ambulance service.
3. A third option would add Rancho Adobe Fire Protection District territory to the scenario above.

Staff believes that these options may provide a better operational fit, because the territories would be part of the agencies that provide direct operational support in the form of mutual aid and incident response. Staff also believes that these alternative alignments hew closely to the ALS/ambulance service criterion.

As to financial viability, because these options haven't yet been analyzed, this criterion cannot be adequately assessed.

Finally, staff recognizes that the County would be faced with the task of negotiating new financial transfer agreements, and therefore may be reticent or unwilling to support these options. Similarly, there is at least anecdotal evidence that some or even many of the VFCs and subject agencies may not prefer these options.

Other Service Provision Options

Staff cannot recommend a long-term extension of the contract with the County to support the existing North Bay Fire, Inc. service delivery model. Although it would appear that this model could be extended (and perhaps should be to allow time to evaluate this proposal and alternatives), the revenue from imposing Gold Ridge FPD's (or another agency's) special taxes on the subject territories would be foregone, certainly leading to at best maintenance of existing service levels and more likely, a continued erosion of service.