

SONOMA LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSION

575 ADMINISTRATION DRIVE, ROOM 104A, SANTA ROSA, CA 95403

(707) 565-2577 FAX (707) 565-3778

www.sonomalafco.org

Staff Report

Meeting Date: October 5, 2022

Agenda No. Item 4.1

Agenda Item Title: Study Session: Fire and EMS Agency Sphere of Influence Criteria and Proposal Evaluation

Proposal: Staff is requesting that the Commission review and discuss criteria for evaluating Sphere of Influence amendments for fire and emergency medical service agencies, and that they further review and discuss three proposals for amendments.

Environmental Determination: Exempt.

Staff Contact: Mark Bramfitt

Analysis

Background

In 2019, the Commission considered criteria developed by staff for the evaluation of Sphere of Influence (SOI) amendments for fire and emergency medical service agencies. Setting spheres of influence is crucial in determining which agencies can seek reorganizations and under what conditions - while they don't represent "pre-approval" they certainly offer a "road map" for the affected agencies.

In light of three SOI amendment proposals which all feature challenges with regard to satisfying these criteria in one or more ways, staff is requesting that the Commission review the criteria and the three proposals, providing staff with guidance on how best to bring the proposals forward. Staff has also prepared modest updates regarding general developments within the fire service agency community in Sonoma County.

The County, as the agency responsible for County Service Area 40 – Fire Services, and independent special districts affected by the proposals are also seeking the Commission's guidance.

Staff has prepared four sets of reports (as attachments) to cover these issues and is providing a summary below.

Sphere of Influence Criteria

Staff has identified two areas for discussion regarding the evaluation criteria that the Commission is using for fire and emergency medical service agency SOI amendments:

Operational Fit

The existing criterion for "operational fit" is essentially solely focused on direct operational support – provision of resources, in the form of staffed crews, to respond to calls within a given area. Under this interpretation, it would not make sense to establish spheres of influence that featured discontinuous territories.

In simple terms, this criterion supports SOI amendments that recognize how one agency may provide mutual aid ("backup") resources to another, or one that provides direct response in the form of advanced life support/ambulance coverage.

For the case of the remaining volunteer fire companies serving territory within County Service Area 40, the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, which is managing the North Bay Fire Inc. contract to support the remaining volunteer companies, notes that the provision of direct funding support, administrative services, and training, even in the absence of direct operational support as described above, should be recognized within the operational fit criterion.

Advanced Life Support/Ambulance Territory

Staff believes that the current criterion regarding evaluation of existing advanced life support (ALS) and ambulance transport territories should retain prominence amongst the six criteria for evaluating SOIs.

In this view, territories receiving ALS/ambulance services would naturally be included in the SOI of the provider agency.

However, staff recognizes that an SOI proposal that features transfers of financial resources from an agency that is within an ALS/ambulance provider territory to the provider could be considered. Simply stated, an agency could propose a SOI amendment and eventual reorganization that featured financial payments to the agency providing the ALS/ambulance service.

(Staff has also updated this criterion to reflect recent reorganizations which notably subsumed two ALS agency providers into Sonoma County Fire District.)

Proposal One: Sonoma County Fire District and IRP Areas 51, 56, and 61 (Partial)

As part of two recent reorganizations involving the annexation of the former Russian River Fire Protection District and Forestville Fire Protection District to the Sonoma County Fire District, areas immediately to the north of those Districts should have been included. The areas include the Armstrong Redwoods State Reserve, the Austin Creek State Recreation Area, a portion of Dry Creek, and surrounding territory.

These so-called “Incident Response Areas” are within County Service Area 40 (“CSA 40”), and were directly served, under contract to the County, by Russian River and Forestville. They are now directly served by the Sonoma County Fire District.

A portion of Incident Response Area 61 has just been annexed to the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District. The southern portion of the area is accessed from the south, and therefore should be included in Sonoma County Fire’s SOI.

Staff notes that a Municipal Service Review (MSR) of the areas has not been conducted, which is required to support an SOI amendment.

The County is not offering Sonoma County Fire any financial support for taking on these territories. Further, staff notes the potential for a reorganization proposal to be successfully protested by landowners and/or registered voters within the territories, as these communities would not be receiving any service improvements or enhancements in exchange for being subject to Sonoma County Fire’s parcel taxes.

Staff does recommend conducting the necessary MSR and the proposed SOI amendment but does not sense any particular need for urgency other than to support the County’s stated desire to dissolve CSA 40.

Proposal Two: IRP 71 – City of Santa Rosa Unincorporated Islands

There are on the order of forty-five islands of unincorporated territory within the City of Santa Rosa. Some of these islands (in the southeast and northeast quadrants of the City) were once within the Rincon Valley Fire Protection District, and are now, subsequent to a reorganization, part of the Sonoma County Fire District.

The balance of the islands, mostly in the northwest quadrants of the City, remain in County Service Area 40 as part of Incident Response Area 71.

The City of Santa Rosa's Fire Department is clearly best-positioned and does provide direct services to these islands. Rincon Valley Fire, and subsequently Sonoma County Fire, has a resource and response sharing agreement with the City that covers these circumstances. The County of Sonoma pays the City for coverage of their islands on a per-call basis.

To support the eventual closure of CSA 40, the remaining islands in IRP 71 need to be addressed. Staff believes that all potential options are problematic:

- The best solution, and not solely from a fire and EMS service provision point of view, would be annexation of all of the islands to the City of Santa Rosa. Despite conversations with the City over many years, and the option of exploiting the island annexation provisions in Cortes-Knox-Hertzberg, this option has a very low probability of being successful.
- The City of Santa Rosa could make its Fire Department a subsidiary district, allowing it to cover the islands as part of its territory. Although there may be other advantages to the City for pursuing this course, staff believes that it is highly improbable.
- The islands could be included in another agency's SOI (most likely Sonoma County Fire's) and subsequently annexed. Staff notes that the imposition of Sonoma County Fire's parcel taxes on the islands would likely prove unpopular, and that an annexation move might therefore be successfully contested by landowners and/or registered voters within the islands.
- Staff points out that the status quo condition could be continued, with the County and Sonoma County Fire retaining the islands, continuing to contract for services with the City. This option will not be suitable from the County's perspective.
- Lastly, some "creative" contractual arrangement could be fashioned, whereby CSA 40 is dissolved but the County continues to pay for service provision from the City using other sources for funding.

Staff's recommendation is not to pursue any activities regarding this situation prior to an indication from affected agencies on how to proceed.

Proposal Three: Gold Ridge FPD/North Bay Fire, Inc., CSA 40 and Monte Rio FPD SOI

The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District entered into a contract with the County to manage North Bay Fire, Inc., which is an amalgam of the remaining volunteer fire companies providing services to CSA 40 territory. (Although staff asserts that this contract is subject to commission review, the District has not brought the matter forward.)

According to the District, the North Bay Fire, Inc. partnership has been successful, with Gold Ridge providing direct financial support, training, administrative and leadership, and other services to the volunteer companies.

The District has asked the Commission to consider adopting a SOI, and to consider a subsequent reorganization proposal, that would expand the District to include the volunteer company territories, as well as the Monte Rio Fire Protection District.

The District notes that they have secured a financial agreement with the County, that along with an extension of Gold Ridge's parcel taxes to the new territories, would ensure the financial viability of service provision going forward.

Staff has recommended that Gold Ridge FPD prepare a Plan for Services document showing how the reorganization would work from an operational, financial, and governance perspective. This document is required for a reorganization proposal and would be beneficial in consideration of the proposed SOI amendment.

The District has provided a draft Plan for Services; staff has provided feedback regarding weaknesses in the document, outlined in the attached report (Attachment 4).

Staff further feels that the proposal does not align well with the SOI 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.
- 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.

Therefore, staff has been reticent to bring this proposal forward, and needs guidance from the Commission to break what has become an impasse.

The District and County are also acutely interested in moving this proposal forward. In order to assess parcel taxes in the next fiscal year in the CSA 40 territories, a reorganization would have to be completed by June or July of 2023, which is a very challenging timeline given the need for further Municipal Service Review assessments.

The County would like to see resolution of these matters to secure the eventual dissolution of CSA 40.

Other Fire Agency Concerns (Background)

Staff would like to take this opportunity to provide the Commission with some additional information regarding recent developments for the fire and emergency services agency community in the County. Though these may not directly impact the discussion of the previous four items, they may become prominent in the future.

Paid Staff Rates

Fire protection districts and cities in the County that have paid professional staffing are facing a crisis regarding pay rates. With expected cost of living adjustments as well as negotiated pay raises, staffing costs could be expected to increase by double-digit percentages in the very near term. While some tax revenue sources, notably property taxes, have increased in recent years due to economic factors, the revenue is highly unlikely to match increased operational costs.

These increased costs will put pressure on these agencies that may lead to provision of diminished service levels.

Pay Differentials

Several agencies in the County have long managed a pay rate differential issue - their pay rates are below that for major agencies in the County, and lower than that for agencies in more urban regions of the Bay Area and state. Some agencies report that their pay scales are as much as thirty percent lower than comparable nearby agencies, leading to staff recruitment and retention challenges.

Employees often join these agencies to secure training and experience and then seek higher wages and career advancement opportunities elsewhere. Anecdotal and actual reports suggest that this issue is becoming more acute. The Kenwood FPD recently reported that over half of their staff resigned; the District has entered into an emergency staffing arrangement with Sonoma Valley Fire District.

(Kenwood and Sonoma Valley have acknowledged that they need to seek LAFCO review of a staffing contract and have committed to doing so absent an application for outright reorganization.)

Engine Staffing Levels

In conversations with several fire chiefs in the County, staff has been advised that a “2/0” staffing model is almost never a viable model for adequately responding to emergency calls. A “2/0” model means that there are two firefighters on an engine, rather than the preferred three firefighters on a “3/0” crew.

A 2/0 crew may be able to adequately staff a minor medical incident but cannot be expected to handle calls involving serious medical issues, rescues, incidents requiring traffic control, or any incident involving fire.

Admittedly, a 2/0 crew can provide additional response, but will require additional units to provide needed services. In the most extreme calls involving structure fires, teams of half a dozen or more crew members are required under safety standards.

For agencies that are currently staffing at 2/0 levels, a need for additional volunteer or paid staffing, or ready mutual aid support is clearly indicated.

Recommendation

Staff is seeking guidance from the Commission regarding amendments to the criteria for evaluating fire and emergency medical service agency spheres of influence. Staff is also seeking guidance regarding three sets of SOI amendment proposals.

Attachments

1. Fire and EMS Agency SOI Criteria Report
2. Proposal 1: Sonoma County Fire District and IRP Areas 51, 56, and 61 (Partial) Report
3. Proposal 2: IRP 71 – City of Santa Rosa Unincorporated Islands Report
4. Proposal 3: Gold Ridge FPD/North Bay Fire, Inc., CSA 40 and Monte Rio FPD SOI Proposal Report