

SONOMA LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSION

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www.sonomalafco.org**Staff Report**

Meeting Date:	September 7, 2022
Agenda No.	Item 5.1
Agenda Item Title:	North Sonoma County Fire Protection District Reorganization No. 2021-03 Involving Detachment from County Service Area 40 – Fire Services, and Annexation of that Territory to the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District
LAFCO File No.	2022-03
Applicant:	Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District
Proposal:	Request for a reorganization of territory consisting of detachment of a portion of County Service Area 40 – Fire Services and annexation of that territory to the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District.
Location:	The County Service Area territories are in Northern Sonoma County, and include the Geysers, Fitch Mountain, and Sotoyome areas.
Environmental Determination:	Exemptions pursuant to Sections 15320 and 15061(b)(3) of the State CEQA Guidelines
Staff Contact:	Mark Bramfitt

Analysis

Background

The Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District (“NSCFPD”) provides fire and emergency services to a large portion of northern Sonoma County.

The District has primary responsibility for serving territory including the Lake Sonoma Recreation area in the north west portion of the District, Geyserville and the Alexander Valley in the central portion of the District, and the Knights Valley area in the eastern portion of the District. The District’s territory abuts Mendocino County in the north and Napa County to the East. An illustrative map of the District territory and the subject agency is included in the District’s Plan for Service (Attachment 1).

The District was until recently known as the Geyserville Fire Protection District; it was renamed after the District annexed a portion of County Service Area 40 – Fire Services that compromised the territory served by the Knights Valley Volunteer Fire Company.

The District has submitted an application by resolution for a reorganization consisting of detachment of additional County Service Area 40 territories in the north County, and subsequent annexation of those territories to the District.

The Commission adopted a Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence Study (“MSR”) for the District in March 2021 that included addition of the affected territory to the District’s Sphere of Influence, making the territory eligible for annexation to the District.

Reason for Request

NSCFPD provides fire and emergency medical services to the largest portion of any agency in the County. Its territory is very lightly populated, but does feature substantive recreational uses (i.e. the Lake Sonoma Recreational area), and commercial activity (wineries).

The District relies on mutual aid and other support from a variety of other agencies, including:

- The Cloverdale Fire Protection District (the two Districts are operating under a Joint Powers Agreement)
- The Cloverdale Health Care District (which provides emergency medical/ambulance services)
- The City of Healdsburg’s Fire Department
- The City of Saint Helena in Napa County (providing coverage support under contract to NSCFPD in the far eastern portion of the District’s territory)

NSCFPD has taken a leadership role in the region for the provision of wildfire prevention services, notably featuring extensive vegetation management activities.

The District is seeking a reorganization involving the annexation of the almost the entirety of the balance of County Service Area 40 – Fire Services (“CSA 40”) in the northern County area. (This area is called “Region 6” in the fire service community.)

The balance of the CSA 40 territory in north county comprises “Incident Response Areas” 61, 63, and 64. These areas cover the Geysers region, the Fitch Mountain area east of Healdsburg, and the Sotoyome area west of Healdsburg.

NSCFPD, in consultation with Sonoma County Fire District, has determined that a portion of the IRP 64 area is more appropriately served from the south due to roadway and geographical access, and has therefore proposed an annexation that leaves that portion out, with the expectation that it will be annexed to Sonoma County Fire.

(Staff encourages fire service agencies to evaluate these kinds of access issues such that they can be addressed during reorganizations, rather than as stand-alone actions at a later time.)

NSCFPD does not have a voter-authorized special tax (a parcel tax). Funding for the expansion of the District, including for increased vegetation management activities, is available through an executed agreement with the County of Sonoma. This agreement involves the transfer of property tax revenues to the District, staged over the next few years.

There are no proposed transfers of facilities or equipment to the District as part of the proposed reorganization. The District intends to negotiate a continuation of a contract for service with the City of Healdsburg to provide coverage in the Fitch Mountain and Sotoyome areas.

The District has prepared a Plan for Service that describes the reorganization and details matters such as operational plans and finances. (Attachment 1)

District Actions

The board of directors of Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District initiated proceedings with LAFCO, by resolution, for reorganization CSA 40 territories on January 12, 2022.

The application for reorganization was filed with LAFCO in the spring, but was delayed to the extensive mapping and mapping approvals processes to describe the boundary adjustment to Incident Response Area 64 (“Sotoyome”), and included a plan for services.

Prior Commission Action

For territory to be eligible for annexation to a district, it must be within the agency's sphere of influence.

Staff completed a Municipal Service Review for Northern Sonoma County FPD and surrounding areas, which the Commission adopted in March 2021.

Environmental Review

As the lead agency for the proposal, the District found that the proposed reorganization is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") pursuant to Section 15320 of the State CEQA Guidelines because the proposed action does not change the geographical area in which previously existing powers are exercised.

The District also found that the proposal was exempt from CEQA under State CEQA Guidelines Section 15061 (b)(3), the "general rule" exemption that CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. The change in fire and emergency services provider will not cause a significant effect on the environment.

Staff agrees with the District's findings regarding the exemptions.

Individual Factors for Consideration

California Government Code section 56668 describes sixteen factors to be considered in the Commission's review of an annexation proposal. The review must include, but is not limited to, consideration of these factors. The factors are outlined and addressed in Attachment 2.

Need for Public Hearings: Merits and Protest

As indicated earlier in this report, Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District initiated the proceedings with the Commission by resolution. In a situation in which it is clear that not all owners of property within the affected territory or all registered voters residing within the annexation boundary have given their written consent to the proposal, state law requires the Commission to conduct a public hearing on the merits of the proposal.

Notice of this public hearing was published in the Santa Rosa *Press Democrat*; there is not a regional media outlet in northern Sonoma County that published legal notices.

Should the Commission approve the reorganization proposal, Staff recommends that a protest proceeding be scheduled commencing on November 2, 2022 and concluding at the Commission's October 5, 2022, meeting, constituting a 51-day protest period. To provide public notice for the protest proceeding, staff will publish notices in the same fashion as for this hearing.

Notwithstanding the requirements to conduct a protest proceeding, staff has received a variety of letters regarding the proposal, which are included as Attachment 4.

Recommendation

Staff requests that the Commission conduct a public hearing on the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District's proposal to detach County Service Area 40 – Fire Services territories in northern Sonoma County, and to subsequently annex those territories to the District.

Staff recommends the following, subsequent to the Commission's deliberations:

1. Approve the reorganization, pursuant to the following findings and determinations:
 - a. The affected territories are within the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District's sphere of influence, making them eligible for annexation.
 - b. The reason for the reorganization is to allow residents of the affected territories to directly receive the full range of services provided by the District.
 - c. The Municipal Service Review conducted for Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District and neighboring County Service Area 40 territories, and the accompanying Sphere of Influence Study, reflects the District's ability to serve the affected territory.
 - d. Existing property tax revenue, and property tax transfers from the County of Sonoma, will be sufficient to provide and maintain services to the newly-reorganized District territory.
2. Pursuant to the State CEQA Guidelines, find that the proposal is categorically exempt to CEQA, under Section 15320, or, if the proposal could be considered to be a project, find it exempt pursuant to Section 15061(b)(3) the State CEQA Guidelines.
3. Set a protest period beginning on September 12, 2022 and ending at the conclusion of a protest proceeding at the Commission's regularly-scheduled meeting on November 2, 2021.

Staff has prepared a draft resolution for the Commission's review and consideration (Attachment 3).

Alternate Recommendation

None

Attachments

1. Plan for Service
2. Factors for Consideration
3. Draft Resolution
4. Letters of Support for Proposal