



GOLD RIDGE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

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*Serving Hessel, Twin Hills, Freestone, & Rural Sebastopol
Fire Chief Shepley Schroth-Cary*

Dear Sonoma LAFCO Ad Hoc:

Thank you for meeting with me on February 8th to discuss the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (the “District”) reorganization application submitted to LAFCO on November 30, 2022, which is set for hearing before the entire Commission on April 5, 2023. I appreciate your feedback and provide this supplemental letter to offer additional clarifying information.

West County Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence Amendment

In July 2019, LAFCO approved a “Municipal Service Review for West County Fire and Emergency Service Agencies”, including the District and most of the County Service Area County Service Area # 40 (“CSA-40”) areas.¹ No specific revisions to any of the agencies’ Spheres of Influence were recommended in this Municipal Service Review (“MSR”). I understand from our meeting earlier this month that, in preparation for the Commission meeting on April 5, 2023, the LAFCO staff is completing a supplemental MSR for the remaining CSA-40 areas of Two Rock, Wilmar, Sant Antonio and Lakeville.

As one point of reference, the District is pleased to note that on page 20 of July 2019 MSR, LAFCO highlights the District “Best Practice” regarding equipment management: “Gold Ridge FPD employs a vehicle lease plan that “smooths” equipment replacement costs. The District accesses seven-year lease funding with very low interest rates to purchase vehicles, incorporating repayment costs as a regular expense line item, thereby obviating the need to designate and manage a dedicated capital reserve fund.” After reorganization is completed, the District will continue this successful best practice for equipment and apparatus management.

In September 2019, following approval of the West County Fire Agencies MSR, LAFCO approved a draft “Fire and EMS Agency Sphere of Influence Amendment Criteria”, which was a result of LAFCO’s “strong desire for fire and emergency medical services in the County to reorganize into large regional units as a means of sustaining and potentially improving service levels to communities.”² The District reorganization application specifically addresses all six of the criteria identified by LAFCO, demonstrating how the proposed reorganization is consistent with the LAFCO requirements for amending the sphere of influence for fire and EMS agencies in Sonoma County.

¹ The 178-page July 2019 “Municipal Service Review for West County Fire and Emergency Service Agencies” can be found on the LAFCO website under “Proposal and Projects”. The link is <https://sonomalafco.org/Microsites/LAFCO/Documents/Archive/Projects/A%20Service/West%20County%20Fire%20MSR.pdf>

² A copy of LAFCO’s six-page “Fire and EMS Agency Sphere of Influence Amendment Criteria”, dated September 16, 2019, is attached hereto as **Exhibit 1**.

As stated on the page 2 of the LAFCO criteria, amended spheres of influence “indicat[e] an expectation of eventual boundaries within a five- to ten-year timeframe.” It is important to remember that the proposed District sphere of influence is for future planning purposes and creates the opportunity for LAFCO-approved reorganization. In this case, while the Monte Rio Fire Protection District has expressly requested in writing to be included in the District amended sphere of influence, Monte Rio is not included, at this time, in the expanded District reorganization to annex the CSA-40 areas.

Scope of Reorganization

The District specializes in a rural fire service delivery model and will utilize a combination volunteer and full-time staffing model. The District proposes to annex the following areas of CSA-40, also known as North Bay Fire: Fort Ross, Camp Meeker, Bodega, Valley Ford, Bloomfield, Two Rock, Wilmar, Lakeville, San Antonio, and IRP-81.

The reason for the proposed annexation is to increase fire and emergency services throughout a large portion of rural Sonoma County (approximately 120 square miles), eliminate CSA-40, and to honor and respect the preference of the participating agencies. Upon completion of the reorganization, the District will have unified jurisdiction of an area stretching from Fort Ross in the North to the Sonoma/ Marin County line in the South. The area experiences all types of emergencies but at a low frequency.

The District’s plan for service utilizes the existing response zones to develop a customized plan for each zone. As shown in the attached Service Zones description, the response zones are all unique, but also have similar challenges.³ In addition to the Service Zone descriptions, the District’s reorganization application on pages 26-33 provides details of the various facilities that will be annexed into the District. As stated in the reorganization application, consistent with fire agency best practices, the District will conduct a comprehensive District-wide Standards of Cover study within two years of reorganization to guide decisions about operational requirements affecting future facilities and equipment utilization.

Recognizing both the differences and similarities allows the District to properly address the needs of each community, as well as taking advantage of standardized solutions when appropriate. The annexed area will continue to be served primarily by volunteers. The agencies who provide mutual and automatic aid will continue to serve portions of the annexed area. The District is confident in its ability to provide an increased fire and emergency response to the annexed CSA-40 areas.

Continuing Management of CSA-40 Agencies

Since 2019, the District has been managing the volunteer companies of North Bay Fire CSA-40. The District’s scope of work includes leadership and oversight of fire and emergency response, development of effective safety programs, development of policy, training volunteers in accordance with Federal and State standards, recruitment and retention of volunteers,

³ A copy of the North Bay Fire Service Zones description is attached hereto as **Exhibit 2**.

equipment and fire apparatus replacement and maintenance, budgeting and fiscal planning, along with numerous other responsibilities that are typical of managing a fire district.

While the operational fit of this consolidation may not be immediately obvious, you must consider the success of the last several years. Additionally, management of volunteers and utilizing a combination staffing model requires a level of expertise which the District has consistently demonstrated. These services have been provided with a budget of \$2.2 million. For nearly 4 years, the District has gathered operational information, built relationships, and improved the level of service for the entire CSA-40 area.

Three Revenue Sources Support Financial Sustainability

In January 2022, the County of Sonoma and the District signed a Concurrent Resolution and accompanying revenue sharing agreement for the reorganization of the remaining CSA-40 territory. It is very important to understand the highlights of the revenue sharing agreement and other revenue that the District will collect, as this comprehensive information establishes that there is adequate and secure funding that will provide financial sustainability for the reorganized District into the future.

Base funding from the revenue sharing agreement was \$3,862,626.00, funded in perpetuity. The base funding agreement is adjusted by the Annual Bay Area CPI. Since the signing of the funding agreement, the CPI adjustment has increased the base funding to \$4,222,073.94.

The District special tax will be applied to the entirety of the annexed area for the reorganized District. This parcel tax assessed by the District is estimated to generate \$600,000 annually. The parcel included a provision allowing the District to adjust the base rates for residential and commercial properties by the annual COLA.

The characteristic of the existing property tax/ad valorem tax in the annexed area is very consistent in the subject territories as they are not sold and bought at a very high volume. The estimated revenue from property tax is \$537,374.00.

The three revenue sources combined equals \$5,359,447.94.⁴ The revenue sources offer stability with growth. A secure revenue source along with opportunities for efficiencies through consolidation makes this a fiscally responsible opportunity.

Ground Ambulance Services

One of the LAFCO spheres of influence criteria in **Exhibit 1** is consistency with existing ambulance service territories. The territories of the District and annexed CSA-40 area are predominantly served by three different Advanced Life Support (“ALS”) ground ambulance transport agencies: Coast Life Support District provides ALS ambulance service to the northern portion of Fort Ross; the Sonoma County Fire District provides this service to Fort Ross, Camp

⁴ A copy of the financial summary for the District reorganization is attached hereto as **Exhibit 3**.

Meeker, Bodega, Valley Ford, and parts of Bloomfield; and the Petaluma Fire Department ambulances respond to Two Rock, Wilmar, and Lakeville.

The question of whether the reorganization will align ambulance service territories has been addressed. The Chiefs of the two fire department providers, Sonoma County Fire District and Petaluma Fire Departments, were present at the LAFCO workshop on October 5, 2022, and provided detailed public testimony that they would continue to provide ALS ambulance transport services to the historical and legal boundaries they currently serve regardless of the District reorganization. There is also a suggestion that financial exchange between the District and the agencies providing ambulance service should occur. This misconception was refuted by the testimony of the Chiefs of Sonoma County Fire District and Petaluma Fire Department.⁵

There is a historical practice of the fire service providing inter-agency assistance to one another in the form of automatic aid, mutual aid, and shared services agreements. In fact, such agreements are specifically authorized under the California Fire Protection District Law of 1987. All three types of agreements exist between the District and the agencies providing ALS transport services. There is not a disproportionate service issue or any dispute between the neighboring fire departments and the District's amended sphere of influence is consistent with existing ambulance service territories.

Conclusion

The consolidation of CSA-40 into fire districts has been a goal of LAFCO, the County of Sonoma, and Fire Service Leadership for many years. Through a management contract with the County, the District has gained the experience, knowledge, and trust to do exactly that. The improvements and successes that have been achieved thus far are undeniable and something we are very proud of. A strong foundation has been built that the District is confident will continue to provide success and sustainability for years to come.

Sincerely,

Shepley Schroth-Cary
Fire Chief, Gold Ridge Fire Protection District

⁵ A copy of the Minutes of the 10/5/22 LAFCO workshop are attached hereto as **Exhibit 4**.