

SONOMA LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSION

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Staff Report

Meeting Date: November 6, 2024

Agenda No. Item 4.1

Agenda Item Title: File No. 2024-03: Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence Study for City of Sebastopol Fire Department and Gold Ridge and Monte Rio Fire Protection Districts. Consider adopting determinations of report and amending the sphere of influence of Gold Ridge Fire Protection District to include territory of other two agencies.

Environmental Determination: Exempt pursuant to State CEQA Guideline Sections 15306 and 15061 (b)(3)

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Analysis

Staff has completed a Public Review Draft of a Municipal Services Review and Sphere of Influence study for three fire agencies:

- Gold Ridge Fire Protection District
- Monte Rio Fire Protection District
- The City of Sebastopol Fire Department

The study was conducted at the request of the agencies, who wish to have the sphere of influence of Gold Ridge Fire Protection District amended to cover the territories of the other two agencies. Gold Ridge would then file a reorganization proposal with the Commission, with a target of completing the reorganization by July 2025.

The study has been made available as a Public Review Draft to the public, affected agencies, and interested parties.

Staff is requesting that the Commission review the study and consider adoption by resolution the determinations in the study, and ordering the amendment of the sphere of influence of the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District.

Discussion

The purpose of a Municipal Services Review (MSR) is to evaluate whether local agencies are providing services in an effective and efficient manner, and to determine if there are opportunities for providing services through other arrangements. The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act delineates the categories of evaluation that must be included in an MSR (the Commission may also evaluate any other factors as it deems necessary).

An MSR can also inform the Commission regarding amendments to agency spheres of influence, which is defined as the probable service area of a local agency. Territory within a sphere of influence is eligible for annexation by the agency; territory outside the sphere is not. The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act requires that an additional five categories of evaluation be conducted to consider a sphere amendment.

Determinations of MSR

All three agencies are facing challenges, some of more import than others.

City of Sebastopol

The City of Sebastopol Fire Department is facing the most acute issues. The Department, which was founded in 1902, has always relied on volunteer staffing and now finds it increasingly difficult to respond to service calls, notably during weekday daytime hours.

The city has recently retained Gold Ridge FPD to perform leadership and management duties and has authorized funding for two fire engineer positions. Nevertheless, the city acknowledges response deficiencies including overlong response times, responses with inadequate staffing, and indeed calls where neighboring agencies were the sole responders.

(Staff would like to note that these operational issues are not a poor reflection on the volunteer team at the department – these challenges are being felt at all agencies in the County that rely on volunteers. It is anticipated that after any reorganization is completed, the Sebastopol operation will continue to be a “combined” department, with an active volunteer team to supplement paid staffing.)

The recently enacted sales tax measure to support fire and emergency medical services in the County (Measure H) will provide additional revenue to support the department. The city is also considering additional financial support but is facing a fiscal crisis that make this difficult.

An ad hoc committee of the City Council has been working on these issues for several years and has solicited service proposals from the Graton and Gold Ridge Fire Protection Districts as well as from the Sonoma County Fire District. They have concluded that a reorganization with Gold Ridge best meets the city’s objectives.

From the city’s perspective, a reorganization that would bring the department into the Gold Ridge district will stabilize operations and generate additional revenue through the imposition of Gold Ridge’s voter-approved parcel taxes. Gold Ridge is already a mutual aid provider to the city and operates with a “combined” staffing model.

Gold Ridge FPD

After a reorganization approved by the Commission in 2022, Gold Ridge FPD has faced challenges integrating the volunteer fire companies that were added to its territory, particularly regarding facility ownership issues.

When public agencies reorganize, LAFCO has the authority to direct the disposition of assets and liabilities of the subject agencies. However, the volunteer fire companies were essentially contractors to the County’s County Service Area 40 – Fire Services, and owned their fire stations, generally within a non-profit organizational structure.

In most cases Gold Ridge has managed to strike arrangements with the volunteer associations, securing either outright ownership or long-term leases of fire stations, but some negotiations have not yet proven fruitful.

It is crucial from an operational perspective that Gold Ridge has ownership of these facilities, in part because the district cannot expend funding on facility upgrades without ownership rights. (A portion of Measure H funding is directed at facility improvements.)

(Note that a proposed reorganization of the subject agencies would involve only public agencies, so LAFCO can order the disposition of assets such as facilities. Gold Ridge and Sebastopol are discussing the disposition of the fire house in the city.)

Other than outstanding facility ownership issues, Gold Ridge is well-funded and staffed, and is meeting operational targets.

Monte Rio FPD

The Monte Rio Fire Protection District has addressed volunteer availability issues by securing voter approval for a parcel tax which provides funding for paid firefighter positions for weekday daytime shifts.

The district still faces the challenge of deficiencies at its primary fire house, but otherwise is meeting operational goals.

The primary determinate for the district in seeking a reorganization is the impending retirement of the District's long-time chief. The district, like Sebastopol, has selected Gold Ridge as the best partner in part due to proximity (Gold Ridge serves the territories of the former Ft. Ross and Camp Meeker VFCs) and because Gold Ridge operates "combined" staffing operations.

Operational Statistics

Staff would like to note that call volume statistics are not included in the Municipal Service Review, and that the response time statistics may not be fully reflective of actual operational conditions.

The statistics are determined from call records maintained by RedComm, the joint powers authority that manages dispatch for almost all of the fire and emergency medical agencies in the County. RedComm was staffed by AMR, the company that managed ambulance transport and paramedic service in the exclusive operating area (essentially territory in the central portion of the County surrounding the City of Santa Rosa).

Because Sonoma County Fire was awarded the ambulance service contract, AMR will no longer be the operating contractor for RedComm. With a transition imminent, it has been difficult to secure analytical support to parse raw incident records.

For example, a service call in a given area may have seen response from a neighboring agency or from multiple agencies, and that should be reflected in the statistics and it is not. At worst, if an agency is unable to respond at all to a call, that is not reflected in the response time statistics presented in the report.

(Previous Municipal Service Reviews have noted that response time statistics don't reflect what level of service was provided – for example whether a lone firefighter/medic responded compared to a three-person crew with paramedic-trained staff.)

Determinations of Sphere of Influence Study

Staff did not identify any issues that would preclude an amendment to Gold Ridge FPD's sphere of influence to include the territories served by the City of Sebastopol and the Monte Rio Fire Protection District.

Comments from Subject Agencies

Gold Ridge and Sebastopol provided comments regarding the public review draft of the study. These were modest updates and were incorporated into the draft.

Status of Proceedings

Staff published a Public Review Draft of the study, distributed it to affected agencies and interested parties and posted it to the Commission's website.

It is anticipated that the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District will file one or two reorganization proposals in 2025. These proposals will include plans for services, and the proceedings would include protest opportunities for registered voters and landowners within the City of Sebastopol and Monte Rio FPD.

Recommendation

Staff is seeking review of the report by the Commission and has provided a draft resolution for consideration that adopts the determinations of the MSR and Sphere of Influence study and orders the amendment of Gold Ridge FPD's sphere in anticipation of subsequent proposal(s) for reorganization.

Staff notes that amendments to the study and minor amendments to its determinations can be accommodated in today's proceeding, but substantive changes to determinations or additional determinations might best be addressed in continued hearing.

Attachments

1. Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence Study for City of Sebastopol Fire Department and Gold Ridge and Monte Rio Fire Protection Districts, Public Review Draft
2. Draft Resolution