

SONOMA LOCAL AGENCY FORMATION COMMISSION

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Staff Report

Meeting Date:	March 5, 2025
Agenda No.	Item 4.1
Agenda Item Title:	Gold Ridge Fire Protection District Reorganization No. 2024-13 (Monte Rio Fire Protection District)
LAFCO File No.	2024-13
Applicant:	Gold Ridge Fire Protection District
Proposal:	Request for a reorganization of territory consisting of dissolution of the Monte Fire Protection District and annexation of that territory to the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District.
Location:	The affected territory includes the unincorporated communities of Monte Rio, Rio Grande, Duncans Mills, and Jenner in the lower Russian River area of western Sonoma County.
Environmental Determination:	Exempt pursuant to Sections 15320 and 15061(b)(3) of the State CEQA Guidelines
Staff Contact:	Mark Bramfitt

Analysis

Background

The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (“District”) provides fire and emergency services in unincorporated communities surrounding Petaluma (Lakeville, San Antonio, Wilmar and Two Rock), and the unincorporated communities of Hessel, Twin Hills, Bodega, Bloomfield, and Valley Ford in western Sonoma County, and the communities of Camp Meeker and Fort Ross in the lower Russian River area of Sonoma County.

The District expanded from its original territory of Hessel and Twin Hills (formed through a consolidation of two districts) through the other areas by taking on the majority of County Service Area 40 – Fire Services in 2023. The areas had formerly been served by volunteer fire companies.

The Monte Rio Fire Protection District serves the unincorporated communities of Monte Rio, Rio Grande, Duncans Mills, and Jenner in the lower Russian River region of Sonoma County.

An illustrative map of the District territory and the Monte Rio FPD territory that is the subject of the reorganization proposal is included in the Plan For Service submitted by Gold Ridge Fire to support their proposal (Attachment 1).

The two districts passed concurrent resolutions seeking a reorganization consisting of the dissolution of Monte Rio FPD and the subsequent annexation of the Monte Rio territory to the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District.

The Commission adopted a Municipal Service Review and Sphere of Influence study for fire and emergency service agencies for Gold Ridge and Monte Rio in 2023. The Commission adopted the determinations in the study and amended the sphere of influence of the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District to include the Monte Rio territory. Therefore, the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District is eligible to seek the proposed reorganization.

Reason for Request; History; and Agency Actions

The Monte Rio Fire Protection District is a “combined” fire services operator, with both paid staffing and volunteers (who are recompensed with stipends). The District added paid staff to ensure service coverage when volunteers are less available.

The Gold Ridge and Monte Rio boards have determined that a consolidation of the agencies will ensure continued service to the lower Russian River communities served by Monte Rio FPD. It should be noted that Monte Rio FPD does not provide Advanced Life Support (paramedic)/ambulance transport services. ALS coverage to the area is provided by the Sonoma County Fire District from either their Bodega Bay or Russian River (Guerneville) stations; this service provision will not change post reorganization.

The Board of Directors of both Districts have passed resolutions seeking the reorganization. These resolutions are included in the Plan for Service document.

Prior Commission Action

For territory to be eligible for annexation to a district, it must be within the agency's sphere of influence. The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act requires that the Commission adopt a Municipal Services Review for agencies seeking a sphere of influence amendment. A Municipal Services Review evaluates districts against eight subject areas (the eighth category is very broad, in that the Commission can consider any items it deems pertinent).

Additionally, to support a proposed Sphere of Influence amendment or amendments, the Commission must adopt a Sphere of Influence study that evaluates proposed amendments against five criteria.

Staff completed a Municipal Services Review for the Gold Ridge and Monte Rio Fire Protection Districts in 2023. The Commission adopted the determinations of the study, and further ordered that the Monte Rio territory be included in the sphere of influence of Gold Ridge Fire Protection District.

District Plan for Service

The District's Plan for Service is included as Attachment 1.

Evaluation of Plan for Service

The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act sets no specific requirements for a Plan for Services, so the Commission has broad authority to seek information and analysis from the agency filing a reorganization proposal as it sees fit and necessary.

Commission staff has reviewed the Plan and finds that it sufficiently describes how services will be provided, and how operations will be funded.

The reorganization can be considered financially viable due to two new funding sources. First, voters in Sonoma County passed Measure H in 2024, devoting new sales tax revenue to fire and emergency service agencies, including both Monte Rio and Gold Ridge FPDs. Second, if the reorganization is approved, Gold Ridge FPD will collect voter-approved special taxes, in the form of parcel taxes, on the Monte Rio territory.

Monte Rio FPD passed a special tax measure in 2018, but the rate schedule for those taxes is substantially lower than the taxes assessed by Gold Ridge FPD. For example, a single-family home in the Monte Rio FPD territory is assessed \$200 annually; the tax for Gold Ridge (through a series of tax measures) is \$265 annually for a typical single-family residence. (The tax rate schedules are similarly different for other types of property.)

The increased tax revenue of the parcel tax and Measure M funding initially allowed Monte Rio FPD to hire paid firefighters to augment volunteer staff; Gold Ridge FPD will continue that staffing transition and will have somewhat higher revenues to accomplish this.

Reorganization Conditions

LAFCO has the authority to apply conditions on a reorganization, including regarding the disposition of assets and liabilities of the agencies involved in the proposal. In this case, all of the assets and liabilities of the Monte Rio FPD are proposed to be transferred to Gold Ridge FPD, with no underlying funding or asset transfer agreement.

Environmental Review

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 proposal is also 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.

Individual Factors for Consideration

California Government Code sections 56668 and 56669.3 describe seventeen factors to be considered in the Commission’s review of an annexation proposal of this type. 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

As indicated earlier in this report, both districts 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 issued on January 21, 2025, and published shortly thereafter. Because of the total number of registered voters and landowners within the affected territory, pursuant to Section 56157(h) of the California Government Code, notice was provided through a notice placement in the Santa Rosa *Press Democrat*.

Protest Proceeding

Should the Commission approve the reorganization proposal, conditionally approve the proposal, or approve the proposal with modifications, then the Commission will conduct a protest proceeding which must be noticed for a period of not less than 21 days nor longer than 60 days. Staff recommends that a protest proceeding be scheduled commencing the week of March 10, 2025, and concluding at the Commission's May 7, 2025, meeting. The protest period would then consist of around 45 days.

To provide public notice for the protest proceeding, staff will publish notices in the same fashion as for this hearing, and additionally will mail notices to all landowners within the affected territories.

The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act requires that notices be mailed to landowners when they will be subject to special taxes as a result of a reorganization. In this proposal, Gold Ridge Fire Protection District has voter-authorized special taxes (parcel taxes) that will be applied to the affected territories upon annexation. (The tax rates are substantively different to Monte Rio's FPD's special taxes in both amount and structure.)

Notices to landowners will direct inquiries to Gold Ridge FPD for information regarding tax rates.

Protest Proceeding: Two "Referendums"

Although the Commission is aware of how protest proceedings are evaluated, a broad overview may be useful as a reminder and to the benefit of citizens residing within the Monte Rio FPD territory.

The protest proceeding essentially encompasses two parallel "referendums", allowing both registered voters and landowners within the Monte Rio FPD territory to register opposition to the reorganization (should the Commission approve it).

Registered voters and landowners are free to file written protests with the Commission indicating that they do not support the reorganization. These protest petitions are counted in two categories: one for voters and one for landowners. Note that a registered voter who also owns a property can lodge two protests, one in each category. Similarly, a citizen who owns multiple properties can file protests for each.

If over half of the registered voters, or over half of the landowners (owning over half of the underlying land value in the Monte Rio FPD territory) file protests, the Commission's decision will be vacated.

If over twenty-five percent but less than fifty percent of the voters or landowners file protests, the Commission is directed by law to hold a balloted referendum (election), where only registered voters participate. If more than half of the voters approve the reorganization, the Commission's decision stands.

Recommendation

Staff requests that the Commission conduct a public hearing on the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District's proposal to dissolve the Monte Rio Fire Protection District, and to subsequently annex that territory to the District.

The Commission may deny the reorganization proposal, accept it as presented, or approve it with modifications, including imposing conditions and/or modifying the boundaries of the reorganization.

If the Commission approves, conditionally approves, or approves with modifications, staff recommends doing so pursuant to the following findings and determinations:

- a. The affected territory is within the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District's sphere of influence, making it eligible for annexation.
- b. The reason for the reorganization is to allow residents of the affected territory to directly receive the full range of services provided by the District.
- c. The Municipal Services Reviews adopted for Gold Ridge and Monte Rio Fire Protection Districts reflects the district's ability to serve the affected territory.

If the Commission approves, conditionally approves, or approves with modifications, the proposal, staff recommends doing so pursuant to the State CEQA Guidelines, finding 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.

If the Commission approves, conditionally approves, or approves with modifications, the proposal, staff recommends setting a protest period beginning on or about March 10, 2025, and ending at the conclusion of a protest proceeding at the Commission's regularly scheduled meeting on May 7, 2025.

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

Attachments

1. Plan for Service
2. Factors for Consideration
3. Draft Resolution