

**MUNICIPAL SERVICE REVIEW FOR
WEST COUNTY
FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE AGENCIES**

Appendix 5

Analysis of Fire District Sphere of Influence Issues 1984

Policy recommendations from a report commissioned by Sonoma LAFCO in 1984 that analyzed sphere of influence “issues” for fire districts in the County are attached.

Particularly notable is recommendation six, which notes “... over the long run, it is important that both the Board of Supervisors and LAFCO take a positive stance in support of district consolidation.”

Analysis of Fire District
Sphere of Influence Issues

SONOMA COUNTY LOCAL AGENCY
FORMATION COMMISSION

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III. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONSIDERATION BY LAFCO
AND THE SONOMA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

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Review of the sphere of influence issues presented in the preceeding chapter indicates there are some common policy threads which run through and across fire districts and fire service operations in Sonoma County. The purpose of this chapter is to propose key policy recommendations for consideration by both LAFCO and the Board of Supervisors.

As noted earlier in this report, sphere of influence policy issues need to be considered in conjunction with the overall County fire service plan -- a plan which is currently in its formative stage. Potential changes to the current fire service system which are under consideration by the Board of Supervisors and the fire safety committee emphasize improved coordination in service delivery through:

Equalization in service levels across the County through revised funding policies.

Elimination of duplication of effort in apparatus and personnel through establishment of an integrated response system which ignores political boundaries.

Transition in the County's role in fire service delivery from direct provision of fire suppression services to an expanded role as a provider of support and coordination services to local fire service agencies.

The policy recommendations summarized below have been developed in light of this potential shift in County fire service policy.

1. RESIST FORMATION OF NEW FIRE AGENCIES UNLESS CLEAR CRITERIA ARE SATISFIED.

Currently, and undoubtedly in future years, proposals for the establishment of new fire districts or County service areas will be dealt with both LAFCO and the Board of Supervisors. One of the major problems associated with the

existing fire service system is the proliferation of independent agencies which make coordination, equalization of service, and the improved cost-effectiveness of fire service delivery difficult. As a result, it is important that in coming years extreme care is taken in dealing with new district formation proposals. New district formation proposals should receive positive consideration only if the following criteria are satisfied:

That the area in question faces a rapid transition in service demand which dictates service levels different than those currently provided by the County fire service system. For example, rapid increase in call demand and population density could suggest that a volunteer service system is inadequate to provide necessary service.

That there is clear indication that the current service system is inadequate or will shortly be inadequate to meet area fire service needs. This includes consideration of support either currently or potentially received from the "umbrella" County fire service support system.

Evident need for local control of development from the fire protection perspective. For example, if major development is likely which will clearly exceed local fire protection capabilities in the absence of mandated built-in protection, then expanded local control of development and development impact on fire service needs would dictate expanded control of the local fire service system.

Formation proposals need to include provision for sufficient continuing revenue generation capacity to meet both current and projected service demand without outside subsidies.

Conversely, it is important that both LAFCO and the Board of Supervisors resist district formation which is designed solely to "protect" local "turf rights" which may reflect agency "squabbling" about portions of service areas. Instead of relying on district formation to solve these problems, it is important that the revised County fire service system include provisions to solve these types of problems. As noted above, any addition of more independent fire service delivery entities has the potential to pose barriers to system cost-effectiveness improvements.

2. AVOID DISTRICT-TO-DISTRICT TERRITORY TRANSFERS UNTIL THE INTEGRATED RESPONSE SYSTEM IS RESOLVED.

One of the major components of the recommended revised County service system involves establishment of an integrated response plan which will provide cross-jurisdictional responses regardless of political boundaries. To the extent that this plan is developed, it will insure reasonable response to fire situations for all County areas. This would negate the need for inter-district territory transfers. As a result, territory transfers should be discouraged until the fate of the integrated response system has been determined.

3. ENCOURAGE PROPOSITION 4 LIMIT INCREASES IN SELECTED DISTRICT AREAS.

As the analysis in the preceding sections has indicated, there are selected areas of Sonoma County where fire districts are unable to utilize available revenues because of insufficient Proposition 4 limits. In virtually all instances, these districts are facing revenue problems and are unable to expend sufficient resources to maintain reasonable service levels. To resolve these problems, effective district and County service areas should be encouraged to take Proposition 4 increase proposals to the electorate. This recommendation especially applies to the following situations:

When annexation would result in expanded responsibilities, but Proposition 4 requirements limit the use of available revenues to support expanded service requirements.

When agencies which have insufficient resources to operate must turn back funds because of Proposition 4 limits, and boundary expansion provides no practical opportunity to resolve revenue problems.

4. DO NOT AUTOMATICALLY ALLOCATE AUGMENTATION FUNDS UPON ANNEXATION OR DISTRICT FORMATION.

Transfer of property taxes and augmentation funds is a negotiated item upon annexation or district formation. Currently, the Fire Safety Committee has been

directed by the Board of Supervisors to develop recommendations about potential changes in the allocation of special district augmentation funds for fire service purposes. Until this issue is resolved, annexation proposals and district formation proposals should be treated on a case-by-case basis and should not involve blanket transfer of both property taxes and augmentation funds related to the area in question. Instead, funds should be used as leverage to encourage boundary changes and district formations consistent with overall County fire service policy. Suggested guidelines which should be considered in resolving issues related to both property tax and augmentation fund transfer include:

Encouraging annexation of areas which would diminish the County's direct fire suppression responsibility.

Discourage formation of new agencies where such formation runs counter to Countywide fire protection system organization goals.

Consider the impact on resources available to the County to support "umbrella" services as proposed in the County Fire Service Study.

Consider the cost-revenue trade-off involved in annexation and district formation proposals. This trade-off involves savings to the County (loss of commitment to insurance support of volunteer agencies) compared to the cost of service extension and absorption by either the new district or an existing district.

The financial status of agencies involved including the capability of an agency to extend service without full utilization of potential property tax and augmentation fund resources.

5. DISCOURAGE PARTIAL ABSORPTION OF VOLUNTEER COMPANY SERVICE AREAS.

Several of the sphere of influence proposals contained in the main body of this report involve recommended spheres of influence for selected fire districts which encompass existing volunteer fire agencies. To the extent that annexation proceeds in these areas, they should not occur on a "piecemeal" basis, but

instead, should include absorption of the entire volunteer company service area to insure that the entire area has service continuity. Partial annexation has the potential to severely diminish volunteer company capabilities to maintain service because of restricted contribution or other revenue generation bases.

6. ENCOURAGE DISTRICT CONSOLIDATION AS A LONG-TERM POLICY.

The previous County Fire Service Study concluded that there was no major sentiment for consolidation of existing fire districts in Sonoma County. Desires for local control, community rivalry, and other factors pose substantial barriers to any forced consolidation of fire districts in Sonoma County. Indeed, given existing laws, there are a few steps that could be taken to force consolidation. However, over the long run, it is important that both the Board of Supervisors and LAFCO take a positive stance in support of district consolidation. If the proposed integrated response system is implemented and functions effectively, the climate for maintaining district autonomy may change. As fire service delivery operations become more integrated and political boundaries lose their importance, resistance to district consolidation may diminish. As this climate changes, it is important that the Board of Supervisors and LAFCO take a positive stance in favor of district consolidation.