

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE STUDY
FOR
PORTIONS OF COUNTY SERVICE AREA 40 – FIRE
SERVICES
A DEPENDENT DISTRICT OF THE COUNTY OF SONOMA
Public Review Draft

Sonoma Local Agency Formation Commission
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SPHERE OF INFLUENCE STUDY BACKGROUND

ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITY OF LAFCO

The Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Local Government Reorganization Act of 2000, as amended (“CKH Act” or “CKH”) (California Government Code §§56000 et seq.), is LAFCO’s governing law and outlines the requirements for preparing Municipal Service Reviews (MSRs) for periodic Sphere of Influence (SOI) updates.

MSRs and SOIs are tools created to empower LAFCO to satisfy its legislative charge of “discouraging urban sprawl, preserving open-space and prime agricultural lands, efficiently providing government services, and encouraging the orderly formation and development of local agencies based upon local conditions and circumstances (§56301).

CKH Act Section 56301 further establishes that “one of the objects of the commission is to make studies and to obtain and furnish information which will contribute to the logical and reasonable development of local agencies in each county and to shape the development of local agencies so as to advantageously provide for the present and future needs of each county and its communities.”

Based on that legislative charge, LAFCO serves as an arm of the State; preparing and reviewing studies and analyzing independent data to make informed, quasi-legislative decisions that guide the physical and economic development of the state (including agricultural uses) and the efficient, cost-effective, and reliable delivery of services to residents, landowners, and businesses.

PURPOSE OF A MUNICIPAL SERVICE REVIEW

As described above, MSRs are designed to equip LAFCO with relevant information and data necessary for the Commission to make informed decisions on establishment or amendment of spheres of influence (SOIs). The CKH Act, however, gives LAFCO broad discretion in deciding how to conduct MSRs, including geographic focus, scope of study, and the identification of alternatives for improving the efficiency, cost-effectiveness, accountability, and reliability of public services.

The purpose of an MSR in general is to provide a comprehensive inventory and analysis of the services provided by local municipalities, service areas, and special districts. An MSR evaluates the structure and operation of the local municipalities, service areas, and special districts and discusses possible areas for improvement and coordination.

A written statement of the study’s determinations must be made in the following areas:

1. Growth and population projections for the affected area.
2. The location and characteristics of any disadvantaged unincorporated communities within or contiguous to the sphere of influence.

3. Present and planned capacity of public facilities, adequacy of public services, and infrastructure needs or deficiencies including needs or deficiencies related to sewers, municipal and industrial water, and structural fire protection in any disadvantaged, unincorporated communities within or contiguous to the sphere of influence.
4. Financial ability of agencies to provide services.
5. Status of, and opportunities for, shared facilities.
6. Accountability for community service needs, including governmental structure and operational efficiencies.
7. Any other matter related to effective or efficient service delivery, as required by commission policy.

This Sphere of Influence Study relies on two previously-prepared and adopted Municipal Service Reviews.

The first was a review of West County fire and emergency medical service agencies completed and adopted in 2019. That study included reviews of portions of CSA 40 served by:

- Bloomfield Volunteer Fire Company (inactive)
- Valley Ford Volunteer Fire Company
- Bodega Volunteer Fire Company
- Camp Meeker Volunteer Fire Company
- Ft. Ross Volunteer Fire Company

Additionally, the West County Fire MSR evaluated the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, which is one potential agency to assign CSA 40 territories to as part of the District's sphere of influence.

The second Municipal Service Review evaluated the southern territories of CSA 40 and was completed and adopted in March 2023. That study included a review of the portion of CSA 40 served by:

- Lakeville Volunteer Fire Company
- San Antonio Volunteer Fire Company (inactive)
- Two Rock Volunteer Fire Company
- Willmar Volunteer Fire Company
- IRP 81

Two remaining areas of CSA 40 **have not** been analyzed in a Municipal Service Review, and **are not** covered in this Sphere of Influence Study:

- Two Incident Response Plan areas and a portion of a third, generally north of the unincorporated areas of Guerneville and Forestville. This region includes two parks:

Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve and the Austin Creek State Recreation Area.

- An Incident Response Plan area that covers about a third of forty-five unincorporated islands of territory that are each surrounded by the City of Santa Rosa.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE STUDY

The Sphere of Influence (SOI) is defined as the plan for the probable physical boundaries and service area of a local agency. CKH provides for a review of the sphere of influence every five years or as necessary. The Commission is required to make determinations in five specific areas.

- *Present and planned land uses in the area, including agricultural and open space lands:* This consists of a review of current and planned land uses based on planning documents to include agricultural and open-space lands.
- *Present and probable need for public facilities and services:* This includes a review of the services available in the area and the need for additional services.
- *Present capacity of public facilities and adequacy of public services provided by the agency:* This section includes an analysis of the capacity of public facilities and the adequacy of public services that the Agency provides or is authorized to provide.
- *Social or economic communities of interest:* This section discusses the existence of any social or economic communities of interest in the area if the Commission determines that they are relevant to the District. These are areas that may be affected by services provided by the District or may be receiving services in the future.
- *Present and probable need for services to disadvantaged communities:* Beginning July 1, 2012, the commission must also consider services to disadvantaged communities which are defined as inhabited areas within the SOI whose median household income is less than or equal to 80 percent of the statewide median income.

GEOGRAPHIC SCOPE OF STUDY

Fire and emergency service agencies throughout the county have been conducting discussions to determine if a regional consolidation program would best serve communities and underpin a sustainable service model for the future.

This report reviews sphere of influence amendment options for almost the entirety of County Service Area 40, a dependent district of the County of Sonoma.

In previous, recent reorganizations, large areas of CSA 40 have been detached and annexed to other local fire agencies. These reorganizations included:

Detachment of territory served by the Sea Ranch Volunteer Fire Company and Annapolis Volunteer Fire Company, and inclusion of that territory in a newly-formed North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District.

Detachment of territory served by the Mountain Volunteer Fire Department and inclusion of that territory in a newly-formed Sonoma County Fire District.

Detachment of territory served by the Knights Valley Volunteer Fire Company and annexation of that territory to the Geyserville Fire Protection District. That District has since been renamed as the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District.

Detachment of territory served by the Mayacamas Volunteer Fire Department, and annexation of that territory to the Sonoma Valley Fire and Rescue Authority. That agency has subsequently been renamed as Sonoma Valley Fire Protection District.

Detachment of several Incident Response Plan areas in north County and annexation of those territories to the Northern Sonoma County Fire Protection District.

The areas of CSA 40 covered by this study are part of a contractual service arrangement made by the County with North Bay Fire, Inc., which has representatives from each of the active Volunteer Fire Companies as constituent members. North Bay Fire, Inc. contracts with the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District for leadership, management, and administrative services.

Gold Ridge Fire Protection District is seeking a sphere of influence amendment that would enable a subsequent reorganization proposal that would seek to detach the areas covered in this report and annex them to Gold Ridge. This study examines the Gold Ridge proposal as well as other options for potential SOI amendments.

ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

This study first describes options for SOI amendments of the subject areas of CSA 40, then evaluates them against the Commission's adopted criteria for sphere amendments involving fire and emergency medical service agencies. A document describing these criteria is attached as Appendix 1.

The study then presents a set of summary determinations and determinations that address the five factors required by CKH.

In closing, the study describes the most likely options for sphere amendments based on the evaluations in the report. It is intended that the Commission could approve the study by adopting the determinations, and choosing a sphere amendment from the proposed options.

AFFECTED AGENCIES

CKH enjoins LAFCO to notify Affected Agencies when contemplating adoption of Sphere of Influence amendments. Draft copies of this report have been provided to the following agencies:

- CALFIRE
- Coastal Valleys EMS Agency
- Gold Ridge Fire Protection District
- Rancho Adobe Fire Protection District
- North Bay Fire, Inc.

- City of Petaluma
- Sonoma County Service Area 40 (Fire Services)
- Sonoma County Fire District

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE STUDY

SOI AMENDMENT OPTIONS

Preparation of this study has been prompted by a request from the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, which in seeks a sphere of influence amendment that will allow the District to seek a reorganization of the territory – detaching it from CSA 40 and subsequently annexing the territories to the district.

Should the sphere of influence amendment conform to the District’s request, and a subsequent reorganization or series of reorganizations be approved, the resulting reorganized district would partially or wholly obviate the current contracts between the County and North Bay Fire, Inc. and the contract between North Bay Fire, Inc. and Gold Ridge Fire. Because this is the preferred option of Gold Ridge Fire, the County, and likely the majority of the subject Volunteer Fire Companies, it is listed first among other options.

Option One: The Gold Ridge/County Plan

Amends the Sphere of Influence for all of the territory analyzed in this study, adding it to the Sphere of Influence of the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District. This would allow the district to seek a reorganization involving all of the territory, a portion of the territory, or portions of the territory in serial proposals.

Option Two: Responsibility for CSA 40 Retained by County (No Amendment)

Makes no amendments to CSA 40 at this time, without precluding subsequent sphere of influence amendments involving Gold Ridge FPD or other agencies, an extension of existing contractual service arrangements, or new contractual service arrangements.

Option Three A: Southern CSA 40 to Gold Ridge FPD

Assigns the territories served by five active and two inactive volunteer fire companies ranging from Bodega Bay VFC in the north, south around the City of Petaluma, to the Lakeville VFC in the southwestern portion of the County, and Incident Response Plan area 81 to the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District sphere of influence.

Option Three B: Portion of Southern CSA 40 to Gold Ridge/Other Agency

Would assign some portion of the aforementioned southern territory of CSA 40 to Gold Ridge FPD, and perhaps the remaining portion to another fire and emergency medical service agency.

Option Three C: Camp Meeker VFD Territory Retained by CSA 40 or to Other Agency

Would not amend the SOI for CSA 40 for the Camp Meeker VFC territory, or would assign it to another fire agency sphere of influence, likely to Occidental Community Service District, Monte Rio Fire Protection District, or Sonoma County Fire District.

Option Three D: Ft. Ross VFD Territory Retained by CSA 40 or to Other Agency

Would not amend the SOI for CSA 40 for the Ft. Ross VFC territory, or would assign it to another fire agency sphere of influence, likely a split between Timber Cove FPD and Cazadero Community Services District, or to Sonoma County Fire District.

EVALUATION OF OPTIONS

This report will evaluate each of the sphere of influence options described above, first using four of the six criteria adopted by the Commission for evaluating sphere of influence amendments for fire and emergency medical service agencies (see Attachment 1 for a full description of these criteria). These criteria are:

- Operational Fit
- Ambulance Service Area
- Financial Sustainability
- Agency Preference

The two remaining criteria are Preservation of Further Reorganization Opportunities and Reduction of CSA 40.

Further Reorganization Activities

While it may be a concern that sphere of influence amendments and subsequent reorganizations could preclude other subsequent reorganization proposals, it should be noted that decisions made by the Commission in either instance are not “set in stone”.

For example, if a reorganization in some way “failed”, the Commission has every latitude to reconsider sphere of influence amendments and subsequent reorganizations to address new circumstances. Another potential circumstance would be additional reorganizations of agencies that would result in further regionalization of fire and emergency medical service agencies in the County.

That being said, there is an argument to be made that sphere of influence amendments in and of themselves chart a course for subsequent reorganizations, and therefore foreclose on other proposals. Similarly, reorganizations could prove to be “sticky” – difficult to “unwind” in the face of other worthy proposals.

Reduction of CSA 40 Territory

All of the options clearly move in the direction of setting the stage for reducing CSA 40 (though not going so far as to allow for dissolution given that two remaining CSA 40 areas, comprised of Incident Response Plan areas, are not yet being addressed). Even Option 2, which makes no sphere of influence amendment, does not preclude such changes in the near or long term.

After analyzing each option against the four criteria described above, additional observations and a summary will be presented.

Option One

The assignment of all of the territory of CSA 40 evaluated in this study to the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District Sphere of influence is being promoted by both the County and the District as the appropriate action to enable a reorganization (or, if necessary, a series of reorganizations) that would “finalize” the North Bay Fire, Inc. contract for services arrangement. Therefore, this option can be classified as consistent with agency preferences.

It should be noted that in this case it appears that “agency preference” extends to the volunteer fire companies themselves.

The financial underpinning of the North Bay Fire, Inc. contract includes the property taxes raised for fire service within the studied territories, as well as additional ongoing funding from the County. Coupled with the collection of parcel taxes, which have been authorized in Gold Ridge FPD, and would be extended to any areas eventually annexed to the District, the financial income for this option would be among the highest possible. (Only one other District in the County has a higher parcel tax rate schedule.)

Although it may not be clear whether this revenue stream is sufficient to support the ongoing financial viability of the volunteer fire companies, it is clear that this option likely raises the highest overall revenue.

Gold Ridge FPD asserts that a sphere of influence assignment and subsequent reorganization would be a good operational fit, citing the several years of the North Bay Fire, Inc. contract for service arrangement. Gold Ridge has provided leadership, administrative, and training services to the volunteer companies under the contract, but does not provide direct service – owning and operating vehicles, equipment, and facilities, and directly overseeing volunteer staff at the fire companies.

The District does therefore acknowledge that this “fit” is not precisely what the Commission has adopted in their sphere of influence criteria document, which classifies “fit” as direct provision of services. The District’s Plan for Service to support a reorganization proposal does not anticipate direct provision of services as the Commission has been considering it.

For many of the options evaluated in this report, advanced life support/ambulance transport services are and would continue to be provided by other agencies (the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County Fire, and Coast Life Support). Therefore, this option, like many others, is not consistent with that evaluation criterion.

Options that do adhere to existing ambulance service territories are only pertinent in the near term for those areas served by Coast Life Support (the northern portion of Ft. Ross) and Sonoma County Fire (the southern portion of Ft. Ross and the three northern VFC territories in the southern CSA 40 area).

At the present time, there has been no significant effort made to explore the formation of a fire protection district covering the City of Petaluma and the VFCs within its ambulance service territory.

Option Two

County Service Area 40 – Fire Services, was formed so that the County of Sonoma could provide financial and administrative support to the volunteer fire companies. For decades, the County operated a County Fire Services Department to fulfill these functions.

Evaluating how well that arrangement “worked” over that time would elicit different views from different perspectives, but a realistic service option to consider is to continue the current contract that the County has entered into with North Bay Fire, Inc.

The current contractual arrangement provides the property tax revenue from the studied territories to North Bay Fire, Inc. along with significant additional funding from the County. Continuing the arrangement would forgo additional revenue from a parcel tax that an agency may already have authorized, though a parcel tax measure could be placed before residents in CSA 40.

The current arrangement allows the board of North Bay Fire, Inc. to direct the disbursement of funds for vehicle, equipment, and facilities, as well as other operational costs such as staffing stipends for the VFCs. Each VFC is represented on the board of North Bay Fire, Inc.

The current arrangement also uses a contract for service with Gold Ridge FPD for administrative, leadership, and training services. Though that contract was not brought to LAFCO for review and approval, it could be addressed if the arrangement were to continue.

Maintaining the current arrangement would not “score” that differently against the evaluation criteria than for Option One – though both the County and Gold Ridge would likely not prefer this option. The County has essentially closed their fire services operation, though they continue to do fire inspection services out of the Permit Sonoma office, and may be considering conducting fire prevention (vegetation management) services.

The County would retain the responsibility for supporting fire services in CSA 40 territories, and notably perhaps, Gold Ridge Fire Protection District would not take on direct responsibility for the volunteer fire companies. This circumstance bears weighing by the Commission, the County, and Gold Ridge FPD.

For example, should one of the volunteer companies “collapse” due to a lack of volunteers, as two have done already, which agency will be responsible for “back stopping” the area? It is unlikely that the identified financial revenue in Option One will be sufficient to hire paid

professional staffing, leaving Gold Ridge FPD in an untenable position. In this circumstance it is likely that Gold Ridge would have to appeal to the County to retake responsibility for the affected territory, or to provide additional supplemental funding.

Option Three A

This option is intended to address concerns that were raised in a Commission study session that noted that both the Camp Meeker and Ft. Ross volunteer fire company areas are not contiguous to the southern CSA 40 and Gold Ridge territories, and that clearly Gold Ridge Fire Protection District could never directly operationally serve the areas.

Therefore, this option is marginally better from an operational fit perspective than Option One, and does allow for other potential alignments that better address in particular advanced life support/ambulance transport service provision (described in subsequent options).

Option Three B

This option recognizes that there are other opportunities for service provision within the southern CSA 40 region.

In particular, Sonoma County Fire District, due to their recent annexation of the former Bodega Bay Fire Protection District, has an advanced life support/ambulance service territory that includes the Bodega, Valley Ford and Bloomfield VFC territories. Sonoma County Fire is currently “toned out” for all service calls in this area, which means that they send a response crew automatically to all incidents. Therefore, assigning the sphere of influence of this territory to Sonoma County Fire would fully fit the operational fit and ambulance service area criteria.

The Rancho Adobe Fire Protection District could logically serve the contiguous areas covered by the Lakeville and Wilmar Volunteer Fire Companies, though only the most preliminary discussions of this option have been discussed.

Similarly, the City of Petaluma could ostensibly seek the creation of a fire district that could take on territory beyond the City, including the Wilmar, Two Rock, San Antonio and Lakeville areas. The City provides advanced life support/ambulance transport services by right to these areas. As previously noted, there has not been significant discussion of this potential reorganization.

From a financial viability perspective, the option of assigning sphere of influence of the upper three VFC areas of the southern CSA 40 territory to Sonoma County Fire would be only modestly less attractive than Option One – Sonoma County Fire’s parcel tax is about two-thirds the rates of Gold Ridge’s. Rancho Adobe’s parcel tax rates are somewhat higher than Gold Ridge’s, which would yield more revenue than Option One.

Option Three C

The small territory served by the Camp Meeker Volunteer Fire Company is surrounded to the east, south and west by the Occidental Community Services District, which provides fire and

emergency services. The territory is bounded to the north by the Monte Rio Fire Protection District. These agencies provide mutual aid response to the company.

Assigning the sphere of influence of this territory to either agency would substantively satisfy the Commission's evaluation criteria better than any other alignment, especially with regard to operational fit. The only criterion that would not be satisfied is apparently agency preference.

Option Three D

The CSA 40 territory served by the Ft. Ross Volunteer Fire Company is geographically large, remote, and sparsely populated. The Timber Cove Fire Protection District and Cazadero Community Services District provide most direct operational assistance to the volunteer company, with advanced life support/ambulance transport coming from Sonoma County Fire out of Guerneville and Coast Life Support out of the Sea Ranch.

In recent years, the Company and Cazadero CSD have experienced staffing availability shortfalls. Timber Cove Fire is also facing aging and depleted volunteer ranks.

For several years the County provided supplemental funding to support a contract with CalFire to keep their Cazadero station staffed year-round. CalFire could then support responses in Cazadero and Ft. Ross, and to a lesser extent to the Timber Cove and Monte Rio Fire Protection District territories.

Again, as in Option Three C, there is no better option than assigning the Ft. Ross sphere of influence to a neighboring agency from the perspective of operational fit.

Further, assigning the sphere of influence of the Ft. Ross VFC territory outside of the immediate region will very likely foreclose on the opportunity to re-evaluate service delivery options that might include extending a new contract with CalFire.

Note that this option contemplates assignment of the Ft. Ross area sphere to the Cazadero CSD, with potentially the northern portion of the area to Timber Cove FPD.

Another option is to consider the possibility of aligning the territory more closely with advanced life support/ambulance transport service provision, assigning the northern portion of the territory to Timber Cove (or an alignment that includes North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District), with the southern portion assigned to Sonoma County Fire.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE STUDY: DETERMINATIONS

SUMMARY DETERMINATIONS

- *The County of Sonoma has embarked on an effort to support reorganizations that would eventually eliminate County Service Area 40.*

- *The County of Sonoma does not directly provide fire and emergency services. Services have traditionally been provided by volunteer fire companies, or other local fire agencies through contractual agreements.*
- *The areas covered by this study are now administered by North Bay Fire, Inc. under a contract with the County, that is set to expire in mid-2023. In turn, North Bay Fire, Inc. contracts with the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District for leadership, management, and administration services.*
- *Gold Ridge FPD also serves a small Incident Response Plan area under contract to the County.*

Discussion

The County of Sonoma, through the dependent district of County Service Area 40 (CSA 40), supports the provision of fire and emergency services to areas in the County that are not served by City departments or independent special districts. Historically, that support has been directed towards Volunteer Fire Companies, in limited cases through contracts with independent special districts, and through mutual aid response from special districts.

There are currently seven active Volunteer Fire Companies, two inactive Companies and another five Incident Response Plan areas serviced by CSA 40, located in the north, west, and south portions of the county.

In the past five years, the County has endeavored to cede CSA 40 territory to willing independent special districts, in response to guidance from the fire serves community throughout the County. As part of that effort, the County has effectively closed its fire services department, which provided support to the Volunteer Companies.

In its place, the County has entered into a multi-year contract with North Bay Fire, Inc., which was formed as a 501.3(c) and is made up of representatives from the remaining Volunteer Companies. North Bay Fire, Inc. in turn contracts with the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District to provide administrative and other support to the remaining Volunteer Companies.

There are nine CSA 40 territories that are covered by this report and by the contract with North Bay Fire, Inc.:

- Lakeville VFD
- San Antonio VFD (now inactive and supported by Willmar VFD),
- Wilmar VFD
- Two Rock VFD
- Bloomfield VFD (inactive)
- Valley Ford VFD
- Bodega VFD

- Camp Meeker VFD
- Ft. Ross VFD

There is also one Incident Response Plan area (81) covered by this study. Incident Response Plan areas are those that receive service from a neighboring local agency under contract to the County (typically on a pay-per-call response basis). The Incident Response Plan 81 area is served by the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District.

PRESENT AND PLANNED LAND USES

Determinations

- *Due to the rural and remote nature of the studied territories, projected development growth will be minimal, and will therefore not drive a need for increased services provision.*

Discussion

Although the County's General Plan for land use development is due for an update (with the project beginning as soon as 2023), it is expected that there will continue to be negligible development activity in the areas covered by this study.

Therefore, land use and development will not be a significant driver for increased service needs.

PRESENT AND PROBABLE NEED FOR PUBLIC FACILITIES AND SERVICES

Determinations

- While population growth in the studied territories is not dramatically increasing, calls for fire and EMS services have been growing due to an aging population and increased calls for medical support.
- The studied areas receive advanced life support/ambulance services from neighboring agencies, with fairly long response times due to geographic distances. The volunteer companies will continue to be challenged to provide emergency medical services at the Basic level.
- If volunteer programs lose viability, portions of the studied territories will likely have to rely on support from neighboring agencies, as there will be few opportunities to shift to a paid staffing model due to funding limitations.

Discussion

In all Municipal Service Reviews of fire and emergency medical service agencies conducted by Sonoma LAFCO in the past several years, it has been noted that population growth is a minimal driver in the increase in emergency response requests. (It has recently been reported that the total population in the County has been declining for the past five years.)

The increase in service calls is driven instead by an aging population, and a higher expectation of for emergency medical services.

While all fire agencies and volunteer fire companies in the County have emergency medical service capabilities, most are staffed with paid employees or volunteers that can provide basic life support services rather than advanced life support.

Advanced life support (ALS) services are offered by two cities, and four independent special districts in the County. The County, through the Coastal Valleys EMS agency (a part of Health Services), also contracts for service in a so-called “exclusive operating area” with a private firm to provide ALS and ambulance transport services. This contract is currently in limbo, without a contracted sole provider.

The County Service Area 40 territories evaluated in this study are reliant on ALS/ambulance transport services from the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County Fire District, Coast Life Support, and from the County’s exclusive operating area contractor.

To be certified as an emergency medical technician that can provide basic life support services, candidates must undergo extensive initial training as well as annual ongoing training. Agencies and volunteer companies are finding it difficult to maintain volunteer cadres that are able to meet these training requirements (see next section).

PRESENT CAPACITY ADEQUACY OF PUBLIC SERVICES

Determinations

- *Volunteer Fire Companies (as well as Fire Protection Districts that rely on a volunteer staffing model in whole or in part) will continue to face staffing level and availability challenges.*
- *The fact that two of the Volunteer Fire Company service areas covered by this study have inactive operations (San Antonio and Bloomfield) are indicative of this troubling trend.*
- *If VFCs become increasingly unable to respond to service calls, neighboring agencies (Fire Protection and Community Service Districts) and/or volunteer companies will be increasingly called upon to provide services, potentially reducing their ability to meet service needs within their territories.*

Discussion

Previous Municipal Service Reviews for fire and emergency medical service agencies conducted and adopted by Sonoma LAFCO have noted that it is becoming increasingly difficult to retain volunteers, train them, recruit new volunteers, and to have volunteers available during weekday, daytime hours.

This trend has been evidenced by staffing availability issues at numerous independent fire protection districts and at volunteer companies. In extreme cases, including for two volunteer

companies that serve territories covered in the study, operations have essentially closed down, with neighboring agencies or volunteer companies charged with service coverage.

In some cases, the agencies that may be called upon to provide more service coverage are suffering from staffing challenges of their own, as many agencies rely in whole or in part on volunteers. Agencies have responded to this challenge primarily by offering volunteer duty stipends in the form of payments for attending training, being formally on call, or for responses to service calls.

Some agencies have so-called “combined departments”, which blend a volunteer cadre with a paid workforce. This can be a very successful working model, though wholly volunteer operations are fearful of driving away volunteers by relying on paid staff.

More to the point, “standing up” a paid crew of two personnel around the clock is a very formidable financial challenge, with most districts lacking the revenue to contemplate that operational change.

(A current example of the challenge can be found at the Kenwood Fire Protection District, which despite having a combined staffing model, has found that their pay rates are no longer competitive, forcing the district to contract with neighboring Sonoma Valley Fire District to maintain crew readiness and availability.)

All of the volunteer fire companies that serve territories addressed by this study face staffing challenges, or are likely to in coming years. Any proposed reorganizations should therefore be considered with this circumstance in mind – it is unlikely that any combination of funding resources can support transitioning to a paid staffing model in these areas. Instead, neighboring agencies will increasingly be asked to “back stop” these areas. Potentially to the detriment of service levels provided to their existing service areas.

SOCIAL OR ECONOMIC COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST

Determinations

- *In many cases the Volunteer Fire Companies represent the sole quasi-governmental agency for their respective territories.*
- *Any service model that retains a local, volunteer-based service model, even if operationally supported by neighboring agencies, can continue to provide the benefits of the current volunteer companies.*

Discussion

Volunteer Fire Companies, with their roster of local volunteer firefighters, represent a valued community resource, often representing the only quasi-governmental agency in the regions they serve.

It is expected, and indeed hoped, that future service models for the areas addressed by this study include continued, sustainable volunteer service programs to ensure continued delivery of fire and emergency medical services to these areas.

PRESENT AND PROBABLE NEED FOR SERVICES TO DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

Determinations

- *Disadvantaged Unincorporated Communities (“DUCs”) are defined in the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act, which grants LAFCOs some authority regarding geographical parameters.*
- *Sonoma LAFCO initially defined DUCs using United States Census tracts, which are fairly large in both geographical territory and population. The Commission is currently undertaking an effort to look at a smaller geographical “lens” to determine DUC territories.*
- *While much of the territory studied in this report may be determined to be classified as a DUC, there are no further conditions within the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act that would inform decisions regarding any sphere of influence amendments to the affected territories.*

Discussion

In 2009, legislation amended the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act to enjoin LAFCOs to identify Disadvantaged Unincorporated Communities (DUCs), and to ensure that these areas are included in major annexations to cities and special districts.

The legislation established a mechanism for evaluating the average income levels for a given geographical territory, but left LAFCOs with the responsibility of defining those territories.

Shortly after the legislation took effect, Sonoma LAFCO identified DUCs using United States Census tracts as the defined geographical territory. That analysis yielded seven DUC areas in Sonoma County. The Commission is now conducting a study to refine the identification of DUCs, likely using smaller geographical territories.

That study may conclude that there are DUC territories within the CSA 40 areas analyzed in this report. However, even if that is the case, those findings would have no bearing on potential sphere of influence amendments or subsequent annexations, as and DUCs are already receiving fire and emergency medical services.

SPHERE OF INFLUENCE AMENDMENTS

Determinations

- *Amending the sphere of influence for County Service Area 40 – Fire Services can be supported by this study.*
- *The Commission can choose from the proposed options.*

Discussion

This report presents a series of options for amending the sphere of influence for the majority of the remaining territory in County Service Area 40 – Fire Services, including the territory served by seven operational and two inactive volunteer fire companies and one Incident Response Plan area.

These options have been evaluated against a series of criteria that the Commission has adopted.

A series of determinations have been made across five categories mandated by the Cortese-Knox-Hertzberg Act, as well as a set of summary determinations. The Commission will conduct a noticed public hearing to review the report and in particular the determinations. Upon adoption of the report (by adopting a resolution that lists the determinations), the Commission can select any set of the proposed options for amending the sphere of influence of the dependent County district.