2020 Study of Fire Protection and EMS Services in Unincorporated Monterey County

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Overview

- Purpose and Background
- County’s Role
- Study Agencies and Facts
- Key Findings
- Options for Consideration; Other Service Models
- Conclusion
Purposes of LAFCO’s June 2020 Study

- Meet State requirements
- Provide public information on the fire protection/EMS system
- Identify challenges facing fire districts and volunteer fire brigades
- Highlight potential responses to meet challenges
Background

- Fire services may be provided in a variety of ways
- Monterey County has a diverse population, geography and climate
- Fire service in the County is provided by a variety of Federal, State and local agencies
- Focused on local fire protection in unincorporated area
County’s Role

- No mandate in State law for County government to provide fire protection
- Monterey County does not provide fire protection services
- County has direct roles in:
  - EMS (countywide ambulance contract)
  - Emergency dispatch
  - Regulating land use and development in the unincorporated area
- Cooperative role in promoting defensible space and fuel reduction
Studied Agencies

- Ten fire protection districts
- One community services district
- One airport district
- Two (volunteer) fire companies
- CSA 74: County Emergency Medical Services Agency
Facts and Figures: Overall

- Estimated population: 107,645
- Calls for service: 15,334
- Square miles served: 1,497
- Per capita annual revenue ranges from $109 for Cachagua FPD (property tax rate of 0%) to $3,067 (property tax rate of 25% of each property tax dollar)
- Approximately 2% of the unincorporated area population in “unprotected area”
Key Findings Summary

- All of the agencies reported being able to sustain services for at least five years
- Revenue limitations, primarily property taxes, have not kept up with costs
- Wide variations of district finances, resulting in unequal service levels in different regions
- Past annexations/consolidations have been effective, but limited further opportunities without added funding
- Districts not currently seeking LAFCO action for annexations/consolidations
- Significant financial gap between cost of volunteers compared to career staffing
Key Findings Summary (Cont.)

- Volunteer firefighter demographics have changed
- Wildfires have impacted fire insurance and needs for vegetation management
- Tourism impacts of Big Sur Coast (and all districts) and desire for sustainable operations
- Districts with small population could face difficulty recruiting board members
- CSA 74 provides funding for training and part of EMS Agency’s operation
- 9-1-1 Center is coping with staff shortages and increasing equipment costs
Options for Consideration

1. State legislative actions – primarily funding-related
2. Potential County-level / countywide options (see Executive Summary, page 10)
3. Local fire agency options
4. Communications-related options (see Executive Summary, page 11)
5. Big Sur and Mid-Coast (support ongoing collaborative efforts)
County-Level Options for Consideration

a) Develop a countywide funding strategy to augment fire protection

b) Continue coordination with allied agencies in support for defensible space and vegetation management/fuel reduction

c) Develop an “outcome-based” EMS delivery system that integrates Fire and EMS response

d) County and fire agencies to coordinate on future development potential in areas without local fire protection

e) Seek federal Payment In Lieu of Taxes (“PILT”) support for local fire agencies providing services to federal jurisdictions
Communications-Related Options for Consideration

a) Explore solutions to County Emergency Communications Department’s (ECD’s) resource challenges such as staffing needs

b) Support continued efforts between ECD and CAL FIRE regarding connection of the computer aided dispatch (CAD) systems

c) Develop a strategic plan to replace and fund needed radio infrastructure, working with County Information Technology Dept.

d) Assure interoperable radio communications between fire units and ambulances

e) Develop robust use of cost-effective Geographic Information System (GIS) collaboration among County IT and fire agencies
Other Service-Delivery Model Examples Around the State

1. Joint Powers Authority (JPA): Orange County Fire Authority
   - Serves unincorporated areas and 24 cities
   - Approximately 2 million people served within its boundaries

2. County Fire Department: San Luis Obispo County
   - Protects unincorporated areas of County outside of special districts
   - Governed by County Board of Supervisors

3. County Services Areas (CSAs): Santa Cruz County
   - CSA 4 and 48 protect unincorporated areas of County outside of special districts

4. Independent Fire Protection District: Fresno County
   - 2,655 square miles and serves a population of more than 220,000

5. Dependent Fire Protection District: San Bernardino County
   - Serves 60 Communities/Cities in an area over 19,000 square miles
Conclusion

- Fire and EMS services in unincorporated Monterey County vary widely, depending on availability of funding.
- All of the studied agencies are very cooperative, engaged, and working hard to provide services and reported sustainability for at least five years.
- County plays an important role in managing a countywide ambulance contract, providing emergency dispatch, and in exercising its land use authority, including in high-fire-hazard areas.
- Changes in fire severity, public expectations, volunteer availability and lack of funding are straining the fire protection system.