



County of Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors

Agenda Item Submittal

From: General Services Department

(831) 454-2210

Subject: County Fire Master Plan

Meeting Date: September 24, 2024

Recommended Actions:

- 1) Approve the County Fire Master Plan; and
- 2) Direct the General Services Director to collaborate with the Local Agency Formation Commission to explore the feasibility of converting County Fire into an Independent Fire District.

Executive Summary

The County Fire Department currently lacks a master plan to provide direction and improve service delivery. In 2023, the County contracted with AP Triton to perform an independent assessment of County Fire and develop a County Fire Master Plan. The recommendations of the Master Plan are supported for approval by the Fire Department Advisory Commission, with a recommendation that the County explore the feasibility of converting County Fire into an Independent Fire District.

Discussion

The County Fire Department provides fire protection services to County Service Area 4 (Pajaro Dunes) and County Service Area 48 (County Fire) through a cooperative agreement with CAL FIRE. CAL FIRE administers and manages daily operations of the Fire Department and the County Fire Volunteer system.

In 2023, in coordination with CAL FIRE and with advice from the Fire Department Advisory Commission, the County contracted with AP Triton to conduct an independent assessment of County Fire and to develop a County Fire Master Plan. The Master Plan includes an in-depth analysis of current operational conditions of County Fire and the environment in which it operates. The following elements were analyzed within the aforementioned sections to develop the findings and recommendations outlined below. The findings are summarized by section and the recommendations as the final section of this memo.

Category	Elements
Organizational Structure & Management	Fire Department Organizational Structure, Personnel Management, Foundational Management Principles in Use, Administrative and Support Staffing

Emergency Services & Response	Services Provided by the Fire Department, Emergency Response Staffing, Emergency Services Resources Available, Hazardous Materials Support and Response, Special Operations and Training, Communications and Emergency Dispatch, Emergency Medical Services Transport and Training, Code Enforcement and Inspection Services
Strategic Planning, Performance & Sustainability	Strategic Planning for Fire and Emergency Medical Services, Financial Overview and Sustainability of County Fire (CSA 4 & CSA 48), Capital Facilities and Apparatus Status and Replacement Plans, Service Performance Objectives
Public Outreach and Volunteer Engagement	Public Education and Outreach, Community Input through Stakeholder Interviews, The Santa Cruz County Volunteer Fire Fighter Program Management Components

County Fire Overall

The Santa Cruz County Fire Department (SCCFD) currently lacks a strategic plan, and its management goals and objectives have not been documented or clearly defined. The department's close relationship with CAL FIRE appears to hinder its ability to establish an independent identity. Furthermore, the role of the Fire Department Advisory Commission needs review, updating, and clarification. The reporting relationship between the Santa Cruz County Fire Department and the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is managed through the County's General Services Department.

Staffing & Personnel

Housing costs in the county continue to escalate through limited housing stock and with the high cost of living, constrain the ability of fire department employees to reside within the county, requiring a commute to work.

During peak fire season, the Santa Cruz County Fire Department has fewer on-duty personnel dedicated to Santa Cruz County compared to non-peak fire seasons. The department's career firefighter staffing is 0.5 per 1,000 population during peak season and 0.9 during non-peak season, while the national average is 1.72. Additionally, SCCFD's firefighter volunteer staffing is 3.6 per 1,000 population, compared to the national average of 5.66. Approximately one-third of the Santa Cruz County Fire Department volunteers do not respond to emergency calls. The average annual turnover rate for volunteer firefighters at the department ranges between 7% and 35%.

Service Delivery & Performance

In terms of service delivery and performance, there were significant challenges encountered with the data used for statistical and performance analysis. The complex relationship between CAL FIRE and SCCFD complicates the determination of services provided under county funds. Additionally, the time-stamped data presented for evaluation did not include seconds, and it is unclear whether this omission resulted from

the data not being collected, being dropped, or being rounded. This created an error margin of plus or minus one minute in all time evaluations. Volunteer activity is also not well documented.

From January 1, 2018, through December 31, 2022, there were 9,311 incidents reported for SCCFD. The response area for SCCFD relies heavily on mutual and automatic aid from surrounding agencies and state-funded units from CAL FIRE. Incident densities are highest along the coast, near Watsonville, and along the county line by Highway 17.

Service demand and system analysis for 2020 and 2021 may have been influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and related societal measures. Research indicates a significant change in the utilization of emergency services, with many individuals reluctant to seek medical aid, leave their homes, or travel during the pandemic. Thus, incident volumes for these years may not accurately reflect typical patterns, and further evaluation is warranted as non-pandemic data becomes available. The incident volume showed a notable dip in 2020, with a rebound in 2021 to levels closer to those seen in pre-COVID years. However, the number of responses may change significantly as the community continues to recover.

Approximately 70% of all incidents occur between 8:00 AM and 8:00 PM. The travel distance between each station is excessive, leaving large portions of the service area without adequate coverage. Despite this, none of the individual fire units are overutilized. The one full-time engine, Engine 4211, has the most responses. However, the five Amador-funded engines have similar incident volumes when accounting for their state-funded activities on behalf of the county.

The data provided did not support a review of call processing. The turnout performance for the volunteer apparatus averaged 14 minutes, while the career companies' performance exceeded NFPA 1710 standards, reaching over 6 minutes at the 90th percentile. Enroute time is captured at the ECC after all units have declared their response, which may artificially inflate the turnout time. Additionally, neither the County of Santa Cruz nor SCCFD has adopted any service delivery performance goals or standards. The first-due travel time is 20 minutes at the 90th percentile throughout the system.

Financial Overview

Revenue from special assessments within CSA 4 were insufficient to cover the costs of CAL FIRE services in the area. Fire protection services for the county are provided through a service contract between the County and CAL FIRE. Revenues generated from special assessments in one district, such as CSA 4 or CSA 48, may not be used outside of the respective district, as there is no co-mingling of funds. Revenues collected from the special fire tax assessment within CSA 48 are allocated to pay for services provided by CAL FIRE. CAL FIRE supplies apparatus staffed with three personnel; however, under the current agreement, Pajaro Dunes is staffed with only two personnel. This staffing level is generally considered insufficient for safely delivering suppression services. Since the initial draft of the Master Plan a special benefit

assessment was proposed for CSA 4 and was approved by the stakeholders of CSA 4 restoring staffing levels to an acceptable level.

Life Safety Services, Public Education & Community Risk Assessment

Public education and community outreach are lacking and only provided upon request. Firesafe Santa Cruz County is making a significant and positive impact on the wildfire problem in Santa Cruz County, enhancing wildfire prevention and safety measures. The report includes a Community Risk Assessment that evaluates all hazards, land use, protected physical assets, critical infrastructure, and provides a comparison of Fire Risk in Other Communities.

Key Findings & Recommendations

Based on the analysis performed in the Master Plan, the following key findings and recommendations are highlighted for the County Fire Department's focus over the next 5-10 years. These recommendations have been reviewed and are recommended for approval by the Fire Department Advisory Commission.

Long Range Master Plan Recommendations:

- Complete a 3-to-5-year strategic plan
- Improve service delivery by staffing three stations full time (24 hours / 365 days a year)
- Increase the quality of documentation for reports and time data inputs
- Increase administrative support through the creation of an admin chief position
- Develop a process to review incident data annually for process improvement
- Improve volunteer company activity data collection
- Conduct a volunteer firefighter satisfaction survey
- Set and adopt performance goals
- Develop a public information campaign
- Review the Fire Department Advisory Commission
- Establish a program to increase staffing at stations during peak demand hours
- Develop and implement risk-based public education programs
- Increase volunteer recruitment and retention by hiring a volunteer recruitment coordinator
- Re-evaluate station locations and effectiveness
- Create a comprehensive capital improvement plan

Independent Fire District Feasibility

The current fire service model as studied in the Master Plan, while effective in many areas, faces increasing challenges in maintaining adequate service levels, financial sustainability, and strategic autonomy. Based on findings within the Master Plan related to more effective governance, Staff is recommending to explore the potential to convert County Fire into an independent fire district to evaluate the financial feasibility, potential operational flexibility of the structure to address other fire service service reorganization opportunities, strengthen localized funding sources, and develop a governance structure that could be better aligned with the specific needs of the communities served.

The Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) is also considering the feasibility and potential benefits of transitioning CSA 48 to an independent special district. Collaborating with the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) to assess the feasibility of this transition is a proactive measure to ensure the continued high-quality service delivery while adapting to the evolving demands of the County's fire protection and emergency service needs in the face of climate change.

Financial Impact

While there is no direct financial impact related to the recommended actions. The County Fire Master Plan surfaces several broader financial considerations, including costs associated with implementing its strategic recommendations, such as increased staffing, capital improvements to facilities and apparatus, and enhanced data and documentation systems. Long-term financial sustainability will depend on securing additional funding sources to cover these investments, while ensuring ongoing operational costs are met. The plan also calls for expanding public education, volunteer program support, and service delivery enhancements, all of which require careful financial planning to avoid budgetary strain. These costs must be balanced with the anticipated improvements in service quality and community safety.

Strategic Initiatives

- 6.D (Operational Excellence: Continuous Improvement)
- 1.B (Comprehensive Health & Safety: Community Support)

Submitted by:

Michael Beaton, Director

Recommended by:

Carlos J. Palacios, County Administrative Officer

Attachments:

- a Santa Cruz County Master Plan (FINAL REPORT)
- b Jan 2024 County Fire Master Plan FDAC Report
- c Santa Cruz County Master Plan (FINAL REPORT) - Cover Page

County of Santa Cruz

Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC)

Feedback to Board of Supervisors on the 2023 County Fire Master Plan Report, presented by AP Triton January 2024

In December 2023, a final County Fire Master Plan report was received by the FDAC. The report, which was prepared by AP Triton for the CAO's office, was 272 pages long and included the following sections:

- Section I-A Evaluation of Current Conditions
- Section I-B Support Programs
- Section II: Community Risk Assessment
- Section III: Findings and Recommendations
- Section IV: Appendices

The report was submitted to the Fire Department Advisory Commission in late December, 2023 and was reviewed and discussed by the commission at the Jan 17, 2024 meeting. The Commission finds the following:

Overall:

- The Commission finds that the report has many essential elements of a Master Plan, with next steps being the creation of an achievable strategic plan and operational objectives.
- This report is a very good detailed assessment of the County Fire operations.
- The report is detailed and contains information that the commission is pleased to see, and which can be valuable in crafting a master plan.
- The Commission finds that some of the data presented is inaccurate. The Commission acknowledges this finding by AP Triton: There were significant challenges with the data for statistical and performance analysis.
- The Commission would like to highlight that the recommendations in the document were made by AP Triton, with no input from Cal Fire or the FDAC. Overall, FDAC input on the report was minimal.

Findings:

The Commission agrees with most of the findings laid out in the assessment. The Commission would like to point out that these findings, when taken together, tell a story:

- The Santa Cruz County Fire Department (SCCFD) does not have a strategic plan.

- Management goals and objectives have not been documented and are not clearly expressed.
- With its close relationship to CAL FIRE, SCCFD does not appear to have an independent identity.
- The role of the Fire Department Advisory Commission needs to be reviewed, updated, and clarified.
- The reporting relationship between the Santa Cruz County Fire Department to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors is through the County's General Services Department.

It is the Commission's view that the findings are directionally correct and highlight the need for additional work to be done in the areas of fire safety and prevention.

Recommendations:

AP Triton made 12 Short-term, 3 Mid-Term and 3 Long-Term recommendations. The Commission finds:

1. All recommendations are not equal. Some are relatively simple to implement, others will take effort.
2. Almost all of the recommendations will require investment from County Fire and others. This could be in the form of effort or money or both. The Commission is concerned that due to the time and effort involved, these recommendations will not be acted upon. The Commission urges the Board of Supervisors to allocate appropriate resources to ensure that this report results in actions.
3. Some of these recommendations will have a significant financial impact on the viability of Fire Service in the County Fire service Area.

At the January Commission meeting, the Commissioners considered and voted on each recommendation. Below are the recommendations and the votes for each:

Short Term Recommendations:

A-1: Emphasize Quality Assurance for Time Data Inputs

Commission Vote To Support This Recommendation: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that good data is essential and we would like to see this issue of data collection prioritized by Cal Fire and the County CAO's office.

A-2: Contract with CAL FIRE for one (1) Schedule A Deputy Chief

Commission Vote To Support This Recommendation: Zero

Commentary: The Commission is not sure that this is the right answer, given the current state of the contract / organization. Cal Fire also agrees that this position is not needed based on the current organization.

A-3: Contract with CAL FIRE for one (1) Schedule A Division Chief

Commission Vote To Support This Recommendation: 4 voted yes, 2 voted not now until role is more clearly defined

Commentary: The Commission is not sure that this is the right answer. That said, this position or equivalent staffing capacity may be needed to implement other recommendations. CalFire Chief believes this is needed.

A-4: Review Incident Data Annually

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that an annual review of incident data would be highly desirable.

A-5: Complete a 3–5-Year Strategic Plan

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that this needs to be done. The Commission would like to see clear ownership, and a timeline, for this action to be completed.

A-6: Improve Volunteer Company Activity Data Collection

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that good data is essential and would like to see this issue of data collection prioritized by Cal Fire and the County CAO's office.

A-7: Improve Service Delivery by Staffing Three Stations 24/7/365

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous Support with additional funding

Commentary: The Commission's view is that this is something that we all want, this is something our community needs. The Commission believes that this recommendation will require substantial additional funding sources and cannot be accomplished with current funding.

A-8: Set and Adopt Performance Goals

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that performance goals are essential to tracking and improving performance. We would like to see County Fire come up with suggestions on the goals and how to measure them. The Commission would like to be involved in more dialog on this.

A-9: Consider Proposing a Special Assessment to Generate Revenue from CSA 4

Commission Vote To Support: Commission believes this is outside our scope

Commentary: The Commission agrees that CSA4 needs additional revenue sources

A-10: Conduct a Volunteer Satisfaction Survey

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission ran a survey in the last 2 years and we agree that this should be done on a regular basis.

A-11: Develop a Public Information Campaign

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission believes that this is needed, we need the community to better understand the services that the County Fire department provides.

A-12: Review and Revise Santa Cruz County Code, Chapter 2.120, Fire Department Advisory Commission

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission agrees that the FDAC in its current form is not serving the County appropriately. The code should be reviewed and changed. Commission members would like to be involved in the change.

Medium Term Recommendations:

B-1: Establish a Program for Staffing Stations During Peak Demand Hours

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission is in support, as long as the funding supports this and if this is operationally feasible.

B-2: Develop Risk-Based Public Education Programs for Department-Wide Delivery

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission is in support

B-3: Apply for a SAFER Grant to Hire a Volunteer Recruitment and Retention Coordinator

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission is in support and would like to see this expanded to additional grant opportunities.

Long-Term Recommendations:

C-1: Re-Evaluate Station Locations and Effectiveness Following Staffing Improvements and New Response Data

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission believes we need much more analysis and discussion on this recommendation.

C-2: Create a Comprehensive Capital Improvement Plan

Commission Vote To Support: Unanimous

Commentary: The Commission believes we need much more analysis and discussion on this recommendation.

----- End of Commission Report -----



Santa Cruz County FIRE DEPARTMENT

California

November 2023

- LARGE FILE ATTACHMENTS -

"on file with Clerk of the Board"

Attachments exceeding 30 pages not printed in the downloadable (pdf) full packet are available for viewing electronically on the County's Meeting Portal website:

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Long-Range MASTER PLAN