

Sonoma County still mulling fire department changes

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After years of discussions and hundreds of thousands of dollars in studies and time, Sonoma County's 11 remaining volunteer fire companies — entrenched for decades as independent first responders in the county's most rural pockets — will be absorbed, run by larger neighbors or combined into one fire district.

But not just yet.

And while regional groups of fire agencies continue pushing toward further consolidation and more seamless operations, that also remains in flux.

While all of this has been long sought by many of Sonoma County's fire officials during four years of plodding toward improvements to the county's outdated, uneven and underfunded fire services network of nearly 40 agencies, change remains several hurdles and a few years away.

Fewer fire agencies has been a trend in California as counties opt for streamlined administration and efficiencies. Sonoma County officials want the same but have not identified where the money to revamp the system will come from, particularly in the aftermath of October's firestorms.

"Fire is on top of everyone's mind based on what we all went through as a community in October," said west county Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, who is working with several fire agencies in her district toward collaboration. "Fire district and volunteer fire companies are our safety net and they stepped up hugely in October. Now is a good opportunity to have those conversations about being better and stronger and to ensure the services are available for years to come."

During the October fires, the county's volunteer and career firefighters fought together for weeks while de-emphasizing agency distinctions.

"Our efforts to work together prior to the fires also paid dividends in how well we were able to function together at a higher, more coordinated and effective level during the fires," said Sonoma Valley Fire Chief Steve Akre.

The monumental firefighting effort helped ease much of what remained of longstanding agency turf wars. "Differences became petty" during the fires, said Jim Colangelo, interim director of Sonoma County Fire and Emergency Services which oversees the 11 volunteer companies.

"Everybody came together and helped each other and realized we are all in this together," he said. "We have pushed each other away for reasons that don't make sense anymore."

Galvanized by the firestorms, fire chiefs have fast-tracked plans for change. The 20-member Fire Services Advisory Council, set up by supervisors two years ago to shepherd the transition, approved a committee of six fire leaders to forge a proposal to meet Supervisor James Gore's challenge for bold changes in exchange for county funding. The resulting proposal, still being refined, includes continuing regionalization of the volunteer companies, fire districts and

city departments, adding staff to supplement volunteers in underserved areas, improving standards and more strategically locating stations.

In the past two years, supervisors have approved about \$4.5 million for countywide fire services, well short of the \$11 million chiefs have called for annually to get agencies to uniform firefighting abilities. The new plan could seek more, chiefs said.

In the meantime, Gore has changed his message, saying a fire-exacerbated housing crisis and millions of dollars promised for county road repairs mean large sums of money aren't available for firefighting. He has suggested chiefs champion a fire services ballot measure for a sales or property tax to create the funding they need.

Fire officials say they lack the time and expertise to launch a complicated ballot measure by next fall while working on a countywide fire fix. Instead, they decided to keep pushing their proposal to supervisors.

"I was gut punched. Supervisor Gore said 'go out and raise your own money,'" said Fred Peterson, a volunteer fire engineer and board member for Geyserville Fire Protection District, who also sits on the fire advisory council. "The county needs to make the hard decisions. That's their job."

In the midst of this seminal reorganization effort, there have been other fire-related developments, including the Fire Services Advisory Council recommending supervisors give \$700,000 of already-approved county money to split evenly among seven firefighting regions for recruiting and retaining volunteers. A dwindling pool of volunteers has put more pressure on neighboring agencies, straining the system and slowing aid.

Additionally, the latest in a long line of taxpayer-funded studies analyzing the current fire services network flopped. The county has spent about \$225,000 on three fire studies in four years, none of which significantly illuminated a way forward. The most recent, a \$115,000 review by San Francisco-based Matrix Consulting Group, contained numerous mistakes and was never completed. Officials stopped payment at \$86,000 and won't seek reimbursement.

Current discussions under review for shifting fire agencies include having six contiguous volunteer companies from Bodega down to Lakeville form one long fire district; further collaboration or consolidation for Mountain volunteers, Rincon Valley and Windsor fire districts as well as for Fort Ross volunteers, Timber Cove and North Sonoma Coast fire district agencies, and for Sonoma Valley Fire and Mayacamas volunteers.

Knights Valley's longstanding volunteer fire company, down to three volunteers, is on the cusp of being taken over by the Geyserville fire.

Even Camp Meeker volunteer fire company, the last volunteer holdout to consider change, is talking to Occidental's fire district about collaborating, said volunteer Wilmar Fire Chief Mike Mickelson, who is helping lead the volunteer company changes.

"Everybody is in motion," he said.

Cal Fire also has submitted a proposal to the county for taking over administration of all 11 volunteer companies at an annual cost of about \$5 million, which includes additional fire services aid.

Gold Ridge Fire District, south of Sebastopol, already is a combination of three former west county agencies. It's proposing to run Valley Ford, Bodega and Bloomfield company jurisdictions at a cost of about \$1 million, which would

include added paid staff in volunteer areas.

"It's all about the money," said Gold Ridge Fire Chief Dan George. Gold Ridge can't afford to drop its current service level by taking on other areas without proper reimbursement, he said. Changes, once agreed upon, will need to be reviewed and approved by the Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees governmental agency changes.

The volunteer company proposals to join up with other agencies point to Sonoma County getting out of the business of managing firefighters. The county's Fire and Emergency Services Department oversees hazardous materials and fire prevention, countywide emergency response and the fire companies. It is for its management of fire companies that it has been most criticized.

Mountain Volunteer Company Chief Loren Davis likes the idea of being run by Rincon Valley fire or consolidating with Rincon and Windsor. He said he could let go of his chief's job "with a smile on my face" knowing residents would be well served.

"The plan will give us some staffing during the day on weekdays when most of my people are out working," Davis said. "We'll still have our volunteers. We would still retain an identity" as a Mountain substation of the Rincon Valley Fire District.

Valley Ford Fire Chief Ron Caselli, one of three volunteers left, doesn't mind stepping down if it means better service for the coastal region.

"I'll still be a firefighter in Valley Ford," Caselli said. "At the end of the day, I just want somebody to show up. I don't care what the engine says on it."

Sonoma County supervisors eye changes to emergency system after missteps in fires

JULIE JOHNSON

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A torrent of firsthand reports from firefighters, law enforcement and 911 callers on Oct. 8 confirmed a massive natural disaster was unfolding in the North Bay, but Sonoma County had no coordinated system in place to track the location and spread of the destructive fires that erupted that night.

The shortfall, documented in a state review and the subject of public scrutiny in the past four months, hampered the county's attempt to warn people and direct them to safety, county supervisors acknowledged Tuesday in their first public meeting about the emergency response system.

"We could have saved lives if we'd had a better system of alerts," said Supervisor Susan Gorin, who wept Tuesday as she described harrowing tales of escape by Sonoma Valley residents who told her they were never warned by local authorities of the firestorm, which killed 24 people in the county.

But what if the county had two dozen fire detection cameras that could have given emergency commanders an immediate view into what was happening on the ground? And what if a network of sirens had roused entire communities out of bed when fires ignited after nightfall on that Sunday night and helped them evacuate earlier?

Such new technologies and disaster planning are among the measures Sonoma County could adopt to better prepare for the next major catastrophe, supervisors indicated in their wide-ranging discussion Tuesday with emergency experts from across the Bay Area and nation.

"Not knowing where the front line of the fire was, not knowing where to send crews, I have realized that played a very important role in how you send alerts," said Supervisor David Rabbitt, who comes from a family of firefighters.

The October firestorm exposed gaps in the county's preparation for emergencies, primarily its methods of communicating among emergency responders, with other local government agencies and with the public. The failures — documented in a state review published Monday and in reporting by The Press Democrat since the first week of the fires — have pushed county officials to consider an overhaul of the embattled emergency services division, which is charged with preparing for disasters. The options include transferring oversight of the department from the county administrator to the Sonoma County Sheriff.

Board members made no decisions on that front but were unanimous in their push to improve the county's emergency unit and signaled their interest in embracing a variety of new systems, including emerging technologies and traditional methods, such as fire-detection cameras and community warning sirens.

"How do we stay ready to pounce?" said Supervisor James Gore, the board chairman.

Most fires are first reported in a 911 call, but the night of Oct. 8, dispatchers had no clear way to funnel the hundreds of first-hand reports coming in from Geyserville to the Sonoma Valley to other agencies, said Aaron Abbott, director of REDCOM, an independent agency that runs Sonoma County's central fire and medical dispatch center. Dispatchers

were fielding about 350 calls per hour at the emergency's peak and had reports of more than 800 fire and hazard locations in the first 18 hours.

"That's an enormous task to digest that information," Abbott told supervisors. "The map becomes a giant blob of pins very quickly."

Fire detection cameras are used in the Lake Tahoe area and San Diego County, said Graham Kent, director of the University of Nevada-Reno Seismology lab who helped develop a specialized fire detection camera used in those jurisdictions. Kent said the cameras help fire management officers quickly assess a fire's location and threat, and make faster decisions about what resources to send.

"There's no silver bullet, but what we are confident about is you would have known almost instantaneously exactly what you had," Kent said. "You don't have to wait for them to burn big."

Sonoma County two years ago ruled out use of Amber Alert-type messages to warn people in a natural disaster, relying instead on sign-up programs with limited membership. The number of people registered for the SoCo Alert system, an opt-in third-party program that sends messages from both Sonoma County and Santa Rosa, has more than doubled, from about 12,000 on Oct. 8 to more than 28,500 as of this month, said Jim Colangelo, interim director of the county's Fire and Emergency Services department.

The growth is a sign of encouraging progress, he said, but it underscores the county's need to use multiple ways of reaching its roughly 500,000 residents as well as visitors in the area during disaster.

"It has to be one of the tools in our toolbox, and the toolbox has to be much more comprehensive," he said.

County officials have said that if a similar disaster happened today, they would trigger the forced alerts to cellphones that can reach a much wider audience. The switch came in the wake of a public criticism over the county's decision in 2016 to rule out such alerts in disasters, a move uncovered by The Press Democrat last year and faulted in a state report this week that said the county's understanding and embrace of the wireless alerts was outdated.

"We need to learn the lessons to this event, which was an unprecedented disaster," Colangelo said, noting that his department is helping the county produce a detailed after-action report looking at how the county functioned during the initial response. The report will include interviews with 72 personnel plus 26 additional group discussions.

"We have to understand there are a lot of other threats we face," Colangelo said.

Leaders from nearby emergency departments outlined on Tuesday how their departments function during emergencies, showing a wide variation in size and structure for such public agencies.

In San Francisco, for example, a city of about 875,000 residents — and about 1.2 million people during the day — the emergency management department reports to the mayor and includes 20 full-time staff, plus collaboration with four public information officers. In Santa Clara, with about 2 million residents and 15 cities, the department has about 20 staff members.

In Alameda County, the emergency services unit is housed within the Sheriff's Office. They have three full-time staff members, including a sheriff's lieutenant and a civilian emergency manager, for a county with 14 cities and 1.7 million people.

For Santa Rosa, a city of nearly 180,000, the city's emergency division is a "one-man show" said Neil Bregman, Santa Rosa's emergency preparedness coordinator, a position within the fire department.

Sonoma County's emergency services division has two full-time and two part-time staff and is currently without a top official after its manager, Christopher Helgren, was moved to another department this month. It was Helgren's decision to rule out use of wireless emergency alerts in favor of the opt-in SoCo Alerts and Nixle warning system.

But even alerts pushed onto residents' cellphones may not reach everyone, experts said. Chris Godley, a former emergency manager for San Jose and Marin County, told supervisors research had shown only about 30 to 40 percent of Wireless Emergency Alert messages made it to their intended targets, though he admitted the technology may have already improved on that front.

Renee Domingo, a former emergency services director in Oakland who was there during the deadly and destructive 1991 firestorm in the city's hills, noted some of the other ways governments can communicate with the public about disasters. The city put several sirens in place to warn residents and regularly tested them, asking certain residents to report back that they heard the sirens' distinct sounds to make sure they were still working properly. But Oakland also has engaged in regular public education efforts to encourage residents to be prepared, she said.

"It's really a comprehensive program, and sirens are just one component," Domingo said.

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http://www.sonomawest.com/cloverdale_reveille/news/local-agencies-shocked-by-post-fire-tax-bills/article_332b5aa4-271e-11e8-85c1-e7a724c22aae.html

FEATURED

Local agencies shocked by post-fire tax bills

By Heather Bailey, Staff writer, heather@sonomawest.com Mar 13, 2018 Updated Mar 13, 2018



Areas not directly impacted also feeling the burn

Local agencies, like school boards, cities and fire districts, got a bit of a nasty shock in December when they received a letter from the Sonoma County Auditor-Controller-Treasurer-Tax Collector Erick Roeser. In it, the agency announced the triggering of the calamity reassessment process, a state tax law that is triggered when there is more than \$10,000 worth of real property damage from a state-declared disaster.

This process was triggered, in part, because the county tax rolls had already been issued for the year when the fires struck.

Each tax year, Roeser's office must dole out the property tax shares to the various agencies using what is called "countywide apportionment factors." These are determined yearly by the county auditor and say, essentially, which agencies get how much money.

"When we get the certified (property) values from the assessor, typically in September, we do a process called 'extending the tax roll' and generate bills for every property owner, but we also determine how the tax being levied is going to be distributed to all districts," said Roeser.

Those factors, essentially the percentage each agency receives from the rolls, cannot be changed after they've been issued. Thus, the huge amount of damage in the county means that the overall amount of money available will be significantly lowered. However, the percentages of that pot of money allocated will not change. What this means is most local agencies will be losing an unexpected amount of money.

"We received the reassessment from the assessor and created revised bills, and in the process of doing that we were able to see how much assessable taxed value was being reduced," Roeser said. "At the time of the Dec. 6 letter, from the assessors' estimate, we were expecting the tax roll would be down by \$1.6 billion or 2 percent and that resulted in a Prop. 13 reduction of (approximately) \$16.1 million. We load that into the allocation factors and then determine how much is each agency's share going to go down. The allocations remain the same, but the overall pot went down."

Roeser added, however, that estimates done after that December letter seem to indicate that losses will be five percent higher than originally estimated.

According to the Dec. 6 letter, the City of Cloverdale is set to lose \$42,700.

"We got the letter in December like everyone else. We didn't have any advance notice, but we weren't blindsided by it," said Cloverdale city manager Paul Cayler. "We were expecting there would be something with property taxes but we were given no other advance notice."

While Cayler isn't worried about any significant impacts to the city, he does believe the losses will have to be taken into consideration in future budgets. "The budget is still in development. We did a mid-year budget review that showed our projections were on target. We made some

mid-year adjustments, so we think this year going is going to be fine. But, next year's will take it into consideration. Fortunately, we've seen some other revenue doing better, such as sales tax," said Cayler.

"It's always a concern when you see loss of revenue, but we're fairly confident we'll figure out how to absorb it in the budget," he continued. "For Cloverdale, it's not a catastrophic amount. I don't have a good sense of how long this is going to go on — the discussion on recovery has been anywhere from 24 months to seven years. There will come a basic equity issue that will eventually arise but we're trying to be good neighbors in the meantime."

At first look, the Cloverdale Unified School District looked to be losing a significant amount, \$147,700 for 2017-2018; however, Superintendent Jeremy Decker says thanks to the Local Control Funding Formula, the state is required to cover the losses.

"It's not going to affect us at all," he said. "We're funded at a minimum level by the state — by law they can't fund us less than that."

"The way it works is, first, we take money from property taxes, but then the state is required by law to come in and make up the difference," he continued. "Once I saw we got \$140,000 cut, I panicked — and we need to make sure and check this out — but they said its okay, we'll still be funded at the same level."

Going forward, Roeser sees some relief and remedies on the horizon.

"The next chapter of the story is that we are working with the state, and the state has agreed to backfill lost property tax for non-school districts and that was included in the state-proposed budget in January," he said. "However, school districts are treated differently and the state will handle any backfill differently and more in line with how they handle normal funding for schools."

Some agencies will also lose some funds for next year, but the amounts will be much lower. That's because the losses assessed last year were for only 25 percent of the year, since the fires happened in October, while for the coming two years, those losses will be assessed for the entire year, and the new tax rolls will include new allocation factors.

But even though the state has committed to help, it's still a very fluid situation, according to Roeser. "I think its important for taxing agencies to know that these reductions that we're estimating, we do have a two-year commitment to backfill but we know rebuilding will take longer than that. We've heard (rebuilding will take) two to five years, but once we get beyond the next two years where the state is providing backfill, there will probably be an impact to taxing agencies that won't be neutral or backfilled by the state," he said.

"So, there could be an additional impact at that time for those taxing agencies. It's hard to know how the increase in property values is going to offset that loss because we know that the market is red-hot, which will result in annual increase in revenues on some level. Still they should be cognizant (that the) backfill commitment is only two years," Roeser said.

Local agencies affected by calamity assessment process

Cloverdale Fire: \$14,000

Cloverdale Health Care District: \$700

Cloverdale Unified School District: \$147,700 in 2017-2018 and \$7,200 in 2018-2019

City of Cloverdale: \$42,700

Marin-Sonoma Mosquito Vector Control: \$50,400 in 2017-2018 and \$58,600 in 2018-2019

Northern Sonoma County Air Pollution Control: \$2,800 in 2017-2018 and \$200 in 2018-2019

Dixon native named the department's Firefighter of the Year

By Kimberly K. Fu, kfu@thereporter.com, [@ReporterKimFu](https://twitter.com/ReporterKimFu) on Twitter

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As a kid, Andrew Tomelloso experienced a traumatic incident that involved Dixon firefighters saving the life of his twin brother.

These days, he not only serves with the Dixon Fire Department but has been named its Firefighter of the Year.

Talk about coming full circle.

“It’s been a long journey,” he said. “It’s different every day. I really enjoy helping people. That’s the big thing we get from the job, just helping people.”

Born and raised in Dixon, Tomelloso has deep roots in the community and service in his blood.

His mom is a veteran in the healthcare field, serving as a licensed vocational nurse with Kaiser Permanente. Her dedication to caring for others inspired the same in him.

Plus, there’s that incident when he was just 4 years old.

“He died,” he said, of his brother, who developed cerebral palsy. “The firefighters down the street saved him.”

Unsure how to go about becoming a firefighter, he took fire science classes at night and later did a ride along with Dixon Fire.

He recalled responding to a four-alarm vegetation fire and then an explosion.

“It was crazy,” he remembered.

The fire crew told him to go through a fire academy, so he did. And, he hung out with the crew to glean more knowledge.

“Every chance I could get, I stayed with them,” Tomelloso said.

When the opportunity arose, he signed on as a volunteer firefighter.

About 2 1/2 years ago, he was hired on full time. He’s been a firefighter/paramedic for about 14 months.

Currently, Tomelloso is in the last week of hazmat specialty school and just wrapped swiftwater rescue training in Chico.

He also serves with the Solano County Urban Search and Rescue Team and works a second job — as a part time ER technician at Kaiser Permanente Vacaville Medical Center.

“All the extra money goes to my kids to do fun things,” he shared, of his almost 10-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter.

The firefighter said he's eager to learn new things, anything that will help his crew better serve others.

Which is why he was surprised to learn he was the department's Firefighter of the Year.

"It was a shock. I'm still kind of shocked," he said. "I just come to work and I do my job."

Tomelloso described the title as an honor.

"It's voted on by my peers so I'm very appreciative of it," he said. "It's humbling."

The firefighter said he's happy that he's finally found his niche.

"I enjoy my job," he emphasized. "I enjoy being here."

URL: <http://www.thereporter.com/general-news/20180319/dixon-native-named-the-departments-firefighter-of-the-year>

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