


Agenda Report Reviewed by:  
City Manager: 

CITY OF SEBASTOPOL  
CITY COUNCIL  
AGENDA ITEM

**Meeting Date:** May 17, 2022 Revised to Correct Date  
**To:** Honorable City Councilmembers  
**From:** Ad Hoc Fire Committee  
**Subject:** Fire Committee Report Out and Request for Direction to Committee  
**Recommendation :** That the Mayor and City Council Receive the report and Provide Direction to Staff  
**Funding:** Currently Budgeted: \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No  N/A  
Net General Fund Cost: N/A  
Amount: \$

Account Code/Costs authorized in City Approved Budget (if applicable) AK (verified by Administrative Services Department)  
See Fiscal Impact Section Below

**INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE:**

This item is to request that the City Council Receive the report and Provide Direction to Staff on items contained below. It should be noted that these items are not all inclusive.

**BACKGROUND:**

With the announced retirement of longtime Fire Chief Bill Braga, the City is at a crossroads with respect to the future operation of its Fire Department. If the Chief is to be replaced, that recruitment process should begin immediately and would necessitate a long-term commitment to the person selected, and a commitment to continue with a Municipal Fire Department.

The City Council’s Fire Ad Hoc Committee (Mayor Slayter, Councilmember Rich, and Staff) has studied the matter, including meetings with the Fire Chief, Sebastopol Fire Department volunteers, Sonoma County LAFCO Executive Officer Mark Bramfitt, and the Chiefs of the Sonoma County Fire District (Mark Heine) and the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (Shepley Schroth-Cary). Many options were considered towards the ultimate goal of reaching 24/7 staffing within the next five years, including; maintaining a municipal Fire Department; consolidation with a neighboring fire protection district; forming a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA); and, contracting with another fire district.

**DISCUSSION**

The preservation of life and property is an inherent responsibility of all levels of government. Since disasters in many devastating forms may strike at any time, the City of Sebastopol must provide safeguards that will save lives and minimize property damage through prior planning, preparedness measures and training. In an effort to be prepared for these disasters, we must analyze provision of emergency services from the City as a whole, as well as provision from individual departments, including the Fire Department. In a community-wide emergency situation, all City departments will play important roles, but none is as important as the immediate emergency response of Fire personnel.

The Sebastopol Fire Department is currently staffed by a full time (40 hour) Fire Chief, one full time (40 hour) Fire Engineer, one half time administrative support employee (shared with Building to make a full time, 40 hour, position) but is otherwise a volunteer fire department, as has been the case since inception in 1902. The current

staffing and delivery system provides acceptable response time standards and meets the mission of providing fire and emergency response services by maintaining a well-trained, well equipped volunteer force. The volunteers of the Sebastopol Fire Department have provided one of the highest forms of community service, responding to fires, emergencies, medical calls, and natural disasters such as floods and fires. Nothing beats the sense of fulfillment that comes from doing an important job well while helping the community and this is what the volunteers do. However, it is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain this model for the foreseeable future.

The Ad Hoc Fire Committee was tasked with accomplishing due diligence and making recommendations to the Council towards meeting the long term needs of the Sebastopol Fire Department and the planning of the future of the department, funding, personnel recruitment, and building and maintaining leadership for our community.

As part of the duties of this Committee, the Committee conducted in-depth meetings and analysis based on the topics listed below:

- Current Fire Department Budget and review of current funding to include stipend pay as well as projected funding to reach a level of a staffed 24/7 department within a five year timeframe
- Restructuring of Fire Department as full time (Staffed by Employees) Fire Department (Municipal Department)
- Sales or Parcel Tax Measure to fund full time (Staffed by Employees) Fire Department (Municipal Department)
- Sales or Parcel Tax Measure to fund full time/volunteer department (Municipal Department)
- Consolidation with Another Fire Department (positive or negative impact)
- Discussion with outside agencies to include LAFCO, County, other Fire Departments
- Discussion with County about supporting / not supporting consolidation
- Processes for consolidation/costs
- Funding to obtain outside counsel/consultants to review budgetary items if support for consolidation
- Funding for financial advisory to create five year projected forecast of Fire Department
- Debt financing information for long-term capital projects or equipment items

As community needs change, public expectations for a more comprehensive fire service grow. The funding resources for our City Fire Department are not increasing at a rate equal to the increase in costs for this department including vehicles, apparatus, staffing, and station improvements and repairs. The municipal budget is constrained and there are many unmet needs, City-wide.

Based on the information collected during this in-depth process, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee is recommending that the City begin the consolidation process immediately.

#### Advantages and Disadvantages

There are a number of advantages to the City through consolidation, including immediate access to the full equipment and personnel of a larger District. Better allocation of resources means better service and faster response times, plus immediate 24/7 coverage for the residents of Sebastopol.

The benefit of consolidation is shared by both partners: operational and managerial efficiencies would be achieved; new opportunities for volunteer and paid staff will be provided; a consolidated training program will ensure that responders are effective and efficient; and, the addition of a 24/7 staffed engine company in Sebastopol will enhance the safety of the region and provide an increase in response time to fires, floods, medical emergencies, etc.

Consolidation offers flexibility in staffing which maintains and increases volunteer opportunities and participation as well as providing increased opportunities for career staff. Consolidation would provide a higher level of

service to meet the demands of increased tourism, new housing, and an aging population, thereby strengthening our community and providing depth to emergency response.

The Ad Hoc Fire Committee recognizes that consolidation will cause temporary disruption to the department, because consolidation necessarily involves change. But despite this challenge, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee feels consolidation is nonetheless essential to the future safety of the community. As will be explained below, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee's recommendation for a specific Fire District to consider for consolidation is based largely on its consideration of these potential disruptions. Selection of a Fire District that has an existing culture that values the contributions of volunteer fire fighters, and that has a history of familiarity, collaboration, and mutual aid with our local Fire District will be essential to a successful consolidation effort. These are strengths that we expect will make what has the potential to be an unsettling process move as smoothly as possible.

It's also worth noting that consolidation will not relieve the City of its budgeting obligations to the department. What is needed for the Sebastopol Fire Department to meet its commitment to our community is not "replacement" funding, but is instead an infusion of additional funding, coupled with an infusion of expertise and administrative infrastructure. Consolidation offers those benefits to the City of Sebastopol.

#### Process

Generally, the process to consolidate with an existing District is as follows (along with an estimated timeline): The District would seek a reorganization of its territory through a LAFCO process. First, the District seeking to merge with Sebastopol would seek to change its Sphere of Influence to include Sebastopol (3-4 months). Next, the District would file a Resolution of its Board (with a supporting Resolution of the City Council) to apply to LAFCO for the reorganization (5+ months to fully process).

The Application for Reorganization would need to include a Plan for Service outlining the details of serving the fire and emergency needs of Sebastopol. LAFCO must be convinced that the District has the staffing and equipment to adequately serve the City, and the District seeking the merger would also have to demonstrate that it will have sufficient revenues to provide these services for a minimum of five years.

Assuming LAFCO approves the Reorganization, a Protest Hearing would be conducted among Sebastopol landowners who would be subject to the merged District's Parcel Taxes. If 25% of the assessed valuation property owners say "no" there would need to be an election. If 50% disapprove at the election, the consolidation effort ends. It is rare for sufficient protest to be lodged to defeat a reorganization of this type. Since there many advantages to Sebastopol residents through consolidation, as outlined above, the Committee feels approval of consolidation is likely.

As a reference point, Sonoma County Fire District's current parcel tax is \$280 per parcel for residential landowners. Gold Ridge Fire Protection District's parcel tax for residential landowners is \$265. Parcel tax rates for commercial property owners are slightly different, and there are factors that increase the residential rates in some instances.

As indicated, the Reorganization process takes at least 5 months, therefore, the entire process would likely be accomplished within a year. During this year, the City and the District seeking to merge with Sebastopol would negotiate an agreement to provide support to the Sebastopol Fire District in the future, including ownership and responsibility for maintenance of the fire house, ownership of equipment, and continuing City financial support. This negotiation takes place on a parallel track to the reorganization process and is proposed to be accomplished through a City Council committee, culminating in a separate agreement between the City and the District.

Ultimately the most important outcome of consolidating agencies is that our community will receive the benefit of a sustainable, community minded, dedicated, and professional emergency response and consolidation will create the framework for delivery of sustainable fire and emergency services in Sebastopol.

Committee Findings

Over the past three years the Sebastopol Fire Department and The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (hereinafter “GRFD” or “Gold Ridge Fire”) have had both formal and informal conversations regarding the merits of consolidating the two agencies, with recently more formal meetings with The Ad Hoc Fire Committee.

The Ad Hoc Fire Committee identified Gold Ridge Fire Protection District as the most appropriate potential consolidation partner.

Gold Ridge Fire has experienced leadership, management and administrative support with expertise in managing both a paid and volunteer work force, is geographically adjacent, has strong community support, and shares a similar culture.

A copy of Gold Ridge’s current profile is attached to this report to provide a summary description of Gold Ridge’s current services (Attachment 1).

Next Steps

The next steps required would be for Council discussion and direction for the following actions:

1. Support of a Contract with GRFD that includes continued City financial support of a consolidated fire district.
2. Support for an Interim Contract with Gold Ridge to provide the continuation of high quality fire services for our community during the period that the terms of the Consolidation is being negotiated with GRFD.
3. Creation of Ad Hoc Committee for Purpose of Negotiations Only. Items to discuss, but not be limited to, are:
  - a. Interim Contract with GRFD
  - b. Finances/Budgeting
  - c. Ownership of Fire Station
  - d. Maintenance of Building/Remodel
  - e. Vehicle Maintenance/Replacement
  - f. Staffing and service level
  - g. Education and outreach
  - h. Leadership/command staff
  - i. Impact on current volunteers/Employee
  - j. Board of Directors positions for the City
  - k. Retirement/PERS
  - l. Fire Marshall duties
  - m. Interim Chief
  - n. Station identity – branding, logos and name
4. Appointment of Two Councilmembers to this newly created Ad Hoc Committee (if creation of a committee is supported).
5. Authorization to begin the LAFCO Process at the same time negotiations are being discussed.

**PUBLIC COMMENT:**

As of the writing of this staff report, the City has not received any public comment. However, if staff receives public comment from interested parties following the publication and distribution of this staff report such comments will be provided to the City Council as supplemental materials before or at the meeting. In addition, public comments may be offered during the “Public Comment” portion of the City Council discussion of this item.

**PUBLIC NOTICE:**

This item was noticed in accordance with the Ralph M. Brown Act and was available for public viewing and review at least 72 hours prior to scheduled meeting date.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There is no direct fiscal impact associated with the recommended action tonight; however, it is proposed that the City would continue to contribute to the cost of providing fire protection in the City and that the Ad Hoc Committee would negotiate the initial amount which would be dictated by immediate and projected needs with a goal of creating a funding agreement provided to the full City Council that would be to provide consistency to the City budget process, while also meeting infrastructure, apparatus, and operational needs for adequate fire response.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Based on the work of the Ad Hoc Fire Committee, the recommendation is that the City begin the process to consolidate with the Gold Ridge Fire District. During the process as outlined above, and following the retirement of the Fire Chief at the end of this calendar year, in the interim have the Sebastopol Fire Department administered through a contract with the District to ensure the continuation of high quality of fire services to our community.

The Ad Hoc Fire Committee recommends Council accept the report and authorize the following:

1. Support of Contract for continued City support of the consolidated Fire District
2. Creation of Ad Hoc Committee for Purpose of Negotiations Only. Stated term of the new Ad Hoc Committee to be one year. Items to discuss, but not be limited to, are:
  - a. Interim Contract with GRFD
  - b. Finances/Budgeting
  - c. Ownership of Fire Station
  - d. Maintenance of Building/Remodel
  - e. Vehicle Maintenance/Replacement
  - f. Staffing and service level
  - g. Education and outreach
  - h. Leadership/command staff
  - i. Impact on current volunteers/Employee
  - j. Board of Directors positions for the City
  - k. Retirement/PERS
  - l. Fire Marshall duties
  - m. Interim Chief
  - n. Station identity – branding, logos and name
3. Authorization to begin the LAFCO Process at the same time negotiations are being discussed.

**Attachments:**

Gold Ridge Fire Protection District Memo



# **GOLD RIDGE FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT**

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4500 Hessel Road, Sebastopol, CA 95472  
Phone (707) 823-1084 · Fax (707) 829-1175 · www.goldridgefire.org

*Serving Hessel, Twin Hills, Freestone, & Rural Sebastopol  
Fire Chief Shepley Schroth-Cary*

## **MEMORANDUM**

To: Lawrence McLaughlin, City Manager - Sebastopol  
From: Shepley Schroth-Cary, Fire Chief - Gold Ridge Fire Protection District  
Date: May 6, 2022  
Subject: Discussions surrounding possible consolidation

Per your request I have compiled a summary of our discussions surrounding the possibility of consolidating Sebastopol Fire with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District. Over the past three years The Sebastopol Fire Department and our District have had both formal and informal conversations regarding the merits of consolidating the two agencies. During these conversations the benefits of consolidation have been made clear.

### **Operations**

Gold Ridge is a combination Fire District consisting of 12 full-time firefighters, 3 battalion chiefs, a fire chief, 3 administrators and approximately 50 volunteers. The full-time fire suppression staff at Gold Ridge works a 48 hour on-duty, 96 hour off-duty schedule covering three rotating shifts. Gold Ridge volunteers contribute to the organization in several important ways. They are available for response whenever needed, they fill stipend daytime and sleeper shifts, they staff engine companies during large wildland fire response, and provide station coverage. The volunteers are comprised of district residents and out of district members. The District recruits interns from the Junior College who make a year-long commitment to the organization. After their year-long internship, they have the option to become volunteers. Additionally, the District has an Explorer Post which continues to develop new volunteers.

### **Management**

Gold Ridge Fire Protection District will provide experienced leadership, management, and administrative support. Gold Ridge has 24-hour Battalion Chief coverage. The District has a history of successful management of a combination paid/volunteer fire district, balancing the needs of the community with the increasingly difficult challenge of recruitment and retention of volunteers. The District will provide fleet and facility management.

### **Governance**

The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District Board of Directors is comprised of seven Directors elected to four-year terms of office. The formation of the Board of Directors is pursuant to the provision of the California Health and Safety Code section 13842 and Government Code section 56886(n). The terms of four Directors expire in December of 2022, and

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## Revenue

Consolidation will provide a revenue source by overlaying the three special taxes that Gold Ridge Fire Protection District has in place generating roughly \$1.1 million dollars annually. The City of Sebastopol should continue to contribute to the cost of providing fire protection in the city. The City's funding contribution should be expressed as a fixed percentage of the City's annual revenue; therefore, it would fluctuate with the economic ups and downs. Thus, creating consistency and predictability to the City's budgeting process.

## Benefits of Consolidation

- An increased service level will be achieved by the addition of 24/7 staffing at the Sebastopol Station. The addition of staffing will be the most significant enhancement to public safety for the citizens of Sebastopol and the region as a whole.
- The proposed staffing model will include participation from volunteers.
- The inclusion of volunteers is important to ensure appropriate response depth when multiple resources are required i.e.: fires, traffic accidents, storm flood events, and multiple calls within the response area.
- The combining of the two agencies will act as a recruitment and retention tool providing more choices and opportunity for participation.
- A combined work force will strengthen specialized programs like water rescue, large animal rescue, and technical rescue.
- As one agency, immediate efficiencies will be achieved on a day-to-day operational level.
- New opportunities to volunteer and paid staff will be created.
- A consolidated training program will ensure that responders are effective and efficient.
- The benefits of the consolidation will be shared by both agencies.
- We will be better prepared for the challenges of the future.

Sebastopol Fire and Gold Ridge Fire Protection District have a long history and present working relationship. We look forward to formalizing a partnership. The path to consolidating our two agencies won't be easy. There will be a strong emotional response to the idea alone. Integrating two agencies that have a tremendous amount of pride and history will be difficult. The approach must be inclusive, allowing input from all. However, it is my opinion and collectively that of our board, that the benefits of consolidation far outweigh the challenges that might arise throughout the process.

Ultimately the most important outcome of consolidating our two agencies is that our community will receive the benefit of a sustainable, community minded, dedicated, and professional emergency response. While we look forward to next steps, we should always ask the question, how can we best serve the public?