

From: [Kate Haug](#)
To: [Mary Gourley](#)
Subject: Council Mismanagement = Higher Homeowner Insurance Premiums? Public Comment, Item 7, May 17, 2022
Date: Monday, May 16, 2022 8:24:32 AM

Dear Council Members,

In regards to Item 7, Ad Hoc Fire Committee's Report there are several important issues.

Zero Public Engagement/ Council Operating Behind Closed Doors

There has been zero public information on the current status of the Sebastopol Fire Department in terms of its needs, costs and budget. If the Council wants to operate in a manner that is transparent and fulfills its obligation of public engagement, then the public should have had several public presentations where the Sebastopol Fire Department and the other entities involved such as the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District and the Sonoma County Fire District present their value propositions.

In public presentations, budgets should have been presented along with any additional tax consequences.

All budgets should include the necessary upgrades to the current fire station located in downtown Sebastopol as one would assume all property owners within City Limits expect that they will have a fire station that is fully operational downtown. All property owners are paying taxes with the understanding that baseline public services like fire protection are part of their tax payments.

At this point, the documents submitted by Council and Gold Ridge do not contain complete budgets nor reference the costs to the building upgrades.

The document produced by Chief Braga does show different scenarios. Chief Braga's document indicates that maintaining the Sebastopol Fire Department is the most cost effective. The document is included at the end of this letter.

Lack of Due Diligence In Regards to Homeowner and Building Insurance

In addition, Council has not done due diligence in regards to homeowners insurance premiums to analyze if consolidation will raise insurance premiums on homeowners, businesses and commercial property owners.

Insurance rates are based on ISO ratings, which are categorized from 1 to 5. 1 is the best. Currently, Sebastopol has an ISO rating of 3. Gold Ridge has one of 4. This would indicate that residents would be getting a lesser service for a higher cost and also incur higher insurance premiums. See Sebastopol Local Draft Hazard Mitigation Plan October 2021, page 2 of 22.

<https://www.ci.sebastopol.ca.us/getattachment/778c3022-79d2-4085-adc1->

bea2c41cabd4/City-of-Sebastopol-LHMP-Update_Oct2021.pdf.aspx?lang=en-US&ext=.pdf

Many residents of Sebastopol live on fixed incomes. What happens if their homeowners insurance premiums rise because of a fire department consolidation? What happens if they can't get insurance for their primary asset, their home?

How Did We Get to This Point?

The most disturbing question that this document raises is how did the City come to this point of degradation in such a basic and fundamental City service? Is it incompetence, negligence or misuse of public funds?

Clearly, the Fire Department has been waning for several years. We did not suddenly arrive at this situation.

How come the Council was not more proactive 5 or 10 years ago, building a program of long-term sustainability and viability? Why was there no plan in place to address these issues which could have been addressed and funded over the last decade? Why did Council run the department into the ground by not replacing equipment, not retaining staff, and not preparing for the retirement of the current Fire Chief?

If the Council has been aware of funding needs for the fire department, why are they funding so many services for transients - whose numbers are small and in a context of enormous funds coming into the County from the State?

If we can't maintain our fire service, why is the City paying for a \$72,000 per year homeless outreach coordinator, for safe parking expenses, for outside attorneys, for property damage to the Community Cultural Center, for Park Village subsidies, for City Staff to write grants and serve as a liaison to homeless service providers when we have a tiny budget of less than \$11,000,000? Why did the Council have the citizens of Sebastopol assume these transient expenses when the County has spent over \$92,000,000 on homeless services in the last 2 years?

At what point did Council decide to use our limited City funds on a very few number of transients (we should know the actual number because we have a homeless outreach coordinator but the data is never given) over the entire city of 7500 people?

If Council knew there are dire and necessary funding needs in the Fire Department, why hasn't the Ad Hoc Committee for the Unhoused worked with the County to receive annual reimbursements to the Citizens of Sebastopol for Transient Occupancy and Sales Tax revenue lost from the conversion of the Sebastopol Inn to Permanent Supportive Housing?

Why hasn't the money earned by the Sebastopol Fire Department via its strike team work

on larger wildfires been dedicated to the maintenance of the Department?

Why didn't the Council make funding the Fire Department its priority?

What other major systems are failing in the City of Sebastopol due to financial mismanagement by Council? Why isn't citizens' safety at the top of the list?

It is quite disturbing that Council has not been able to maintain and fund the Fire Department as it is such an essential service to all community members.

What Citizens Need Now

Prior to making any decision regarding the Fire Department, this letter asks that Council:

1. Retain the current Chief's Salary in the 2022-2023 budget;
2. Start recruitment for a Fire Chief until it is determined what course of action will serve the Citizens and Businesses of Sebastopol with the highest quality of service and lowest cost;
3. Have public presentations by our current Fire Department, Gold Ridge Fire Protection and Sonoma County Fire District which outline their proposals, full costs, costs to upgrade the fire station and equipment, and funding mechanisms;
4. Complete an analysis in regards to insurance premiums and coverage if there is a consolidation to the Fire Department;
5. Guarantee that any change to the existing Fire Service structure would include the on-going staffing and maintenance of the Downtown Sebastopol Fire Station;
6. Guarantee that any change to the existing Fire Service structure would not degrade Sebastopol's ISO rate below a 3, which is its current level;
7. Create a line item in the 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023 budgets for transient services which include but are not limited to: \$72,000 homeless outreach coordinator, port-o-potties, hand washing station, dumpster pick up, costs of the Laguna sweep, costs to repair public property damaged by transients including the numerous incidents at the Community Cultural Center, outside attorney costs, Public Works time, Fire Department time, Police Department time, City Staff time to write grants, support for Park Village, any costs associated with Safe Parking sites, which still appear to be on the Ad Hoc Committee on the Unhoused agenda;

8. Create City Budgets which prioritizes baseline public services such as fire, police, public works and water before funding transient services which have revenue sources from the State and County;
9. Determine if City Manager/Attorney Larry McLaughlin has been paid to work on behalf of the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District and if this represents a conflict of interest in any consolidation plan that might be negotiated by Mr. McLaughlin on behalf of the City of Sebastopol.

Kate Haug
Sebastopol

City of Sebastopol

FIRE DEPARTMENT

7425 Bodega Avenue
Sebastopol California 95472
Phone 707 823-8061 Fax 823-4703

Bill Braga
Fire Chief

SHORT AND LONG TERM PLAN FOR THE FUTURE OF THE SEBASTOPOL FIRE DEPARTMENT

Background:

The City Council Fire Ad-hoc Committee has been exploring options for the Fire Service delivery system of the city. The Committee has requested proposals from the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District (GRFPD) and the Sonoma County Fire Protection District (SCFPD) as options to delivering fire and emergency services. The direction also included developing a proposal for the city continuing to deliver service through its existing fire department. Included with this memo are the proposals as requested.

Both the GRFPD and SCFPD proposals are based on the fire districts annexing the parcels within the city limits and thus applying the districts special tax fees to the parcels as a method of generating revenues to fund proposals. Both proposals provide estimated costs for fulltime staffing, but otherwise acknowledge that an in-depth cost analysis is required to provide an accurate total cost for the proposal.

Both district proposals also are clear that the estimated cost would not be covered by the districts parcel tax measures and additional funding would be required from the city. The Sebastopol Fire Department plan offers a phase-in approach to achieving a high-level of staffing and addressing station and equipment requirements. While as indicated, a deep financial analysis must occur, however a high-level overview of the costs for comparison is as follows:

	SCFPD	GRFPD	SFD – Phase I and II
Response Staffing	\$2-2.5 million	\$1.1 million	\$207,000
Operational	\$1.5 million*	\$1.5 million*	\$1.3 million
Apparatus Replacement	More analysis required	More analysis required	More analysis required
Temporary Crew Quarters	\$1.5 million*	\$1.5 million*	0
Implementation and Execution Costs	\$100,000*	\$100,000*	0
Fire Station Remodel	More analysis required	More analysis required	More analysis required
Total Estimated Cost:	\$5,100,000- \$5,600,000	\$4,200,000	\$1,507,000

*Not included in the proposals by the Fire Districts but will be a cost required in the execution of a proposal. This cost will be burdened by the city.

State of the Sebastopol Fire Department:

The Sebastopol Fire Department is staffed by a fulltime Fire Chief, 1 fulltime 40-hour Fire Engineer and use of stipend firefighters but is otherwise a volunteer fire department as has been the case since its 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. To that however, it is becoming increasingly challenging to maintain this model for the foreseeable future. This report identifies a strategy to meet these challenges moving forward.

The department responds to approximately 1250-1300 Calls for Service annually. The department also provides fire inspection, fire prevention, community support activities and EOC operations.

The department is a full-service fire department. The services provided include:

- Fire suppression responses
- EMS responses with trained Emergency Medical Technicians
- Special operations including heavy rescue operations, swift water and flood rescue, rope rescue, trench rescue, animal rescue, hazardous materials response, and auto extraction to name a few
- Comprehensive volunteer training program ensuring personnel are well trained and well equipped
- Fire Inspections
- Fire Prevention activities
- Community support programs
- Management of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

The current fire department budget is \$1.35 million and represents approximately 11% of the City's general fund. Comparable cities to Sebastopol in the state spend approximately 20-24% of general fund revenues for fire and emergency responses illustrating that the current model is the most cost-effective model for these critical services provided to the citizens of Sebastopol.

The Fire Chief and City Staff perform administration and other administrative functions. The Fire Chief provides the direct leadership for the organization. The Fire Chief serves at the direction of the Council under the supervision of the City Manager. Duties of the Fire Chief include, but are not limited to, performing fire prevention duties and responsibilities, performs all administrative functions of the department, leads and manages the Volunteer Firefighters, takes part in the EOC operations, serves as the liaison to the community and community organizations (such as CERT, MYN, SNCU).

The 40-hour Fire Engineer performs various administrative support functions, fire station and equipment maintenance and most importantly, improves the reliability of daytime staffing for emergency responses. Stipend paid firefighters are also used to

close the daytime staffing gap.

The volunteer force maintains an approximate 25-person roster of volunteers that responds from home to the stations at the time of emergency responses. Volunteers also attend weekly training sessions and are involved in other support functions.

Challenges:

As discussed, the department is providing an adequate service level meeting minimum response and service standards, is generally meeting equipment and apparatus requirements, and provides quality training to the volunteer staff. As presented to the council in the fall of 2021, the department has challenges with this current model and must address the following:

- Develop and fund a comprehensive apparatus replacement plan
- Funding and purchasing plan for large equipment replacement (i.e., SCBA's, Hoses, and Radio's)
- Plan and fund station improvements and address handicap, gender, and 24 hours staffing accommodations.
- Enhance and fund a comprehensive volunteer recruitment, training, and retention program.
- Address current staffing challenges by providing an adequate response of volunteers to daytime calls. (The complete reliant on volunteers being a sustainable model is not likely.)

Proposal for the City to continue to maintain its own Fire Department and overcome presented challenges:

This proposal is a multi-phase proposal of first maintaining the current most cost-effective staffing model and addressing budget funding specific to apparatus, equipment, and volunteer recruitment and retention. The proposal then would establish the path to achieve the long-term goal for the City is to:

- Reach a staffing level of a Fire Chief, 40-hour Fire Captain, and a minimum 2 fire suppression personnel on duty 24 hours a day,
- Maintain a strong volunteer force to ensure the staffing of technical apparatus (ladder truck, rescue equipment, and mutual aid staffing)
- Provide Battalion Chief coverage in the absents of the Fire Chief
- Develop an enhanced comprehensive recruitment program

- Fortify, fund and execute an apparatus replacement plan
- Make necessary station improvements to accommodate 24-hour staffing.

Phase I:

- Add 1 additional fulltime paid Fire Engineer to the current staffing model and continue to maintain a strong volunteer force to serve as the primary method of staffing equipment and responding to emergencies. (\$130,000)
- Commitment to apparatus replacement schedule meeting the NFPA or industry standards as presented to the council ad-hoc committee. (\$40,000)
- Develop a station improvement needs analysis and calculate the costs of identified improvements (\$25,000)
- Enhance the volunteer staffing model by using stipend firefighters to ensure the integrity of a reliable response for service. This includes potential night shifts depending on signs of burnout of late-night volunteer responses. (\$10,000)
- Fund and develop a robust volunteer recruitment, retention, and training program (\$15,000)
- Evaluate municipal funding mechanisms and options to fund station and staffing improvements in phase II and III. This would include allocation of existing funds, potential sales tax increase, property tax initiatives to fund these future phases.

Phase II:

As phase I indicates, phase II is the phase in which municipal funding mechanisms, including allocation of existing funds, potential sales tax increase, and property tax initiatives, to fund future phases. The key actions of phase II are:

- Determine the method to gain a greater commitment to the fire budget from general fund revenues (at least to a minimum 20%)
- Project the costs of an improved staffing model (ultimately a minimum 3 persons on duty 24/7)

- Evaluate the successes of funding the key components of Phase I and address any shortfalls from Phase I in this phase
- Work with citizens committees and pollsters to develop possible tax initiatives to bring forward to the voters and taxpayer of the citizens of Sebastopol \$25,000
- Evaluate staffing and response challenges and adjust as necessary including the potential of hiring additional fulltime employees (\$20,000-150,000)
- Execute a possible tax initiative as recommended from the findings of the citizens committee and pollsters. (The city at this point cannot be involved in the campaign process)

Phase III:

- Implement/execute station improvement plan (\$ 2 million)
- Evaluate new funding sources that have been identified or implemented
- Evaluate staffing and response challenges and adjust as necessary, including the potential of hiring additional fulltime employees to a potential of a minimum 2 personnel on duty 24/7 (potential \$1.25 million)

Summary:

The benefit of this proposal are as follows:

- Maintains all control of the fire department within the city's governance system
- Continues to maintain a high level of service to its citizens with a phased-in approach to improve levels of service in terms of a reliable, sustainable Standards of Cover
- Continues to provide the greatest economy to value
- Provide for a method to propose potential tax initiatives that are voted on by the citizens of Sebastopol

- Addresses maintaining a strong volunteer firefighting force that is well trained and well equipped
- Addresses equipment, apparatus replacement and fire station improvements
- Maintains the strength and leadership of maintaining the Fire Chief position

BUDGET DEMAND BY PHASE:

PHASE I OBJECTIVES	PHASE I COSTS	PHASE II OBJECTIVES	PHASE II COSTS	Phase III OBJECTIVES	PHASE III COSTS
1 Fulltime paid FF/Engineer	\$130,000	Continued budget commitment to address apparatus, equipment replacement	Requires further analysis	Execute fire station remodel**	\$2 million
Down payment for replacement Rescue Squad	\$40,000	Tax initiative and pollster consulting	\$25,000	Hire staffing to achieve 24/7 up to 2-person staffing **	\$1.25 million
Architect for fire station remodel consulting	\$25,000* (one time cost)	Increased staffing to meet response demands as required	\$20,000-\$150,000	Increased stipend shift to achieve 3-person staffing	\$220,000
Increased stipend shifts if needed	\$10,000				
Volunteer recruitment, retention, and training program	\$15,000				
Annual anticipated budget during phase I budget years	\$1.35 million	Annual anticipated budget during phase II budget years	\$1.57 Million	Annual anticipated budget during phase II budget years	\$2-2.5 Million
Total Funding Demand Through Phase I	\$1,570,000	Total Funding Demand Through Phase II	\$2-2.15 Million	Total Funding Demand Phase III	\$5,470,000

** Contingent on the successful passage of a voter approved tax measure