

FUTURE OF THE SEBASTOPOL VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPARTMENT

On behalf of the SFD volunteer firefighters our comments to the council staff report regarding agenda item 7 are as follows:

The staff report indicates that the matter has been studied, including meetings with the Sebastopol Fire Department Volunteers. This is not true. The first the volunteers learned of this proposal was the Ad Hoc committee members appearing before the volunteers just 5 days prior to the council meeting. At that meeting, we were told what they were going to do, and while solicited questions, they were not interested in our feedback or interests, and did not take one note. Despite the volunteer's concern, the meeting concluded with the committee showing no interest in soliciting input from the volunteers. This creates an adversarial process versus a collaborative one. It should be noted that Council member Rich said that the volunteer input has been achieved through the fire chief. While this may seem like a logical response, this did not occur in practice. The Fire Chief never conducted meaningful meetings with this group of stakeholders.

The staff report seems to present a sense of urgency due to the chief announcing his retirement. This is a self-imposed sense of urgency. Had the chief waited until December to give notice, an interim chief would have been appointed and no lapse of leadership or duties would have occurred. Interim chiefs are appointed with high frequency. Since the Chief did announce his retirement, we agree that it is logical, in terms of timing, to explore the various options specific to the future of the fire department. Suggesting this is an urgent matter and that the interim chief must come from GRFPD is, however, an exaggeration.

The council staff report indicates that many in-depth analyses of options were considered (the staff report listing many). Council member Rich stated several times, at the meeting with the volunteers, that “analysis and data” were used to reach this decision. We feel that the use of the terms “in-depth” “analysis” and “data” are being exaggerated. To put it bluntly, the volunteers are very suspect whether any real, staff level or professional studies have occurred. Studies of this nature are often conducted by consultants and qualified staff. They generate quality, detailed reports which include data points, detailed advantages and disadvantages to options considered. No such reports exist on this matter, or has not been offered for our review. Documents generated by Gold Ridge and by our fire chief are general and conceptual and themselves often referred to “additional analysis required” statements. The current level of analysis is anecdotal at best and no real data on this matter currently exists. This is not acceptable on a matter of such importance. The absence of real data and analysis also does not provide the council with the critical information to make a thoughtful decision.

In the advantages and disadvantages section of the staff report there are statements, following that heading, that are grossly exaggerated, as if they were written for a sales brochure. Most importantly though, those statements make no comparison to the current state of the SFD or other potential options, while inappropriately guiding the council to the notion that this is the only option.

The report provides information on the consolidation process. As taxpayers, we are extremely concerned that property owners may be levied a property tax increase without the benefit of voting on it. As the report indicates, a legal loophole exists allowing, in this process, to tax property owners and circumvent the “Prop 13” values and philosophies. It should be noted that the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers

Association is trying to put an end to this loophole. The report is correct that a public hearing and protest process exists and will occur. The report is also correct that this process is benign and flies under the radar of most property owners and therefore protest thresholds are never met. So as the report indicates, the ability to tax our property owners through this process is likely. Mayor Slater, at the volunteer meeting, indicated that the process of the city bringing forward a tax measure legitimately, would require that we would have to ask for 30-50% more in a tax than the GRFPD parcel tax measures. This is yet another exaggerated statement and it lacks merit, as it is, without any detailed analysis or data to support such a statement. The mayor also indicated that a tax initiative process “would be hard” as it must get 66 2/3% voter approval, as stated to the volunteers. This is true; however, it should be noted that over the last 2 elections in Sonoma County, 9 fire districts had parcel tax initiatives on the ballot and only 1 failed. Yes, it would be hard, but sometimes the hard way, is the right way.

The volunteers are not in disagreement that the current staffing model presents challenges in sustainability and that improvements to the current model will bring funding challenges. The Volunteers are not in disagreement that consolidation is a potential solution. The volunteers are in complete disagreement that this is the only strategy being considered. Consolidation is being sold as the best option without a detailed analysis or quantifying information being presented or provided. Again, it’s all antidotal. By legitimately studying and considering all other options, three important things will be accomplished. First, it allows council to make a fully educated decision on the best option. If consolidation is the best option, it will be vetted or validated in this process. Second, it is possible that the consolidation options could fail in process. By having all options thoroughly analyzed, there would be options in place to shift to if the preferred option fails.

This would prevent any loss in time to advance to another option. Third, it creates an environment of trust for the volunteers and the public to which council serves.

The volunteer firefighters are asking that the direction to the Ad Hoc committee and city staff, is that it proceed with discussions with the GRFPD as outlined in the report. We request, however, that 3 additional recommendations be included.

- 1) Conduct a full-scale study of the issue and solutions or options, showing in depth analysis and data supporting findings. This full-scale study should be conducted by a consultant or internal staff that is fully qualified to conduct such studies and provide a detailed staff report.
- 2) We recommend that upon completion of the study that the full council hold a study session to receive a thorough discussion on the final report and the ability to discuss all options. This is a significant task of defining the future of the city's fire department and warrants this level of work and consideration! It should be noted that when asked about a consultant by the volunteers, the mayor responded that consultants were asked, but did not respond. We feel a decision of this magnitude warrants study and input by an expert. We can assist in identifying one if the Council would like.
- 3) We are requesting that a volunteer representative and a member of the public (which could be one and the same) be included as a part of the Ad Hoc committee process (as referenced in the recommendations section, #2 in the staff report), which is legally possible.

The volunteers have carried out the mission of delivering all aspects of fire and emergency response to the citizens of Sebastopol at a highly

professional and highly trained level. The volunteers have saved the city millions of dollars over the years and allowed the city to fund other departments and programs at a higher level than they otherwise could, all on the backs of these volunteers.

The volunteers are perplexed and disappointed at the lack of consideration, inclusivity and transparency as demonstrated by the council Ad Hoc committee's presentation to the volunteers, which exhibited no interest in the volunteer's input, and was at times, simply arrogant.

The volunteers do not want to be in an adversarial position through this process. The volunteers want to be a part of a team that operates with high levels of cooperation, transparency, inclusivity and professionalism in reaching a consensus on the future of the Sebastopol Volunteer Fire Department. By agreeing to these additional recommendations, we can close this gap.

Respectfully

Mike Simpson

President, Sebastopol Firefighters Foundation