

PUBLIC INPUT – AGENDA ITEM 7 MAY 17 . OPPOSITION TO CLOSING OUR FIRE DEPARTMENT

Sebastopol City Council has once again with little due diligence decided an issue of critical importance to the citizens of Sebastopol with no significant attempt to involve the public or critical stakeholders. I am opposed to the current proposal to outsource responsibility for our fire service to the Gold Ridge District.

This proposal is not well researched. Mayor Slater stated at a meeting with our fire fighters last Thursday, that he has been researching the issue for years in “casual conversations”. Councilwoman Rich stated that the research they did was difficult because they didn’t want word to get out to the community or the current volunteer fire fighters that they were considering consolidation. She termed their efforts as “very private”. The result seems to be another very critical and important decision being made behind closed doors, based on flawed assumptions and incomplete or no data and without adequate due diligence.

No Current Issues

It is interesting that the Fire Department has not been a discussion item for the City Council in more than a year. Suddenly, we need to put an end to the Sebastopol Fire Department because it is not meeting our needs now and in the future. Interesting it comes just after a request to purchase new equipment for the department.

I grew more interested in the Sebastopol Fire Department last year as we experienced persistent fires close by. I met with the Chief to discuss preparedness in our local area. I met with some volunteers to learn more about how they viewed the department.

Few people know that our volunteer fire fighters serve the city without a salary. The city also does not provide health or disability insurance. They train to the same standards as all fire fighters in California. Many of our volunteers have been professional fire fighters and even Captains and Chiefs in other departments They meet all standards for quality and response times, despite aging equipment that the city has consistently failed to prioritize for replacement. Our volunteer department saves the city substantial costs. Sebastopol’s city budget is half that of surrounding communities.

Need a thoughtful approach which includes input from local experts including our Volunteer Firefighters and their Leadership Team.

Neither Council Woman Diana Rich nor Mayor Slayter (the ad-hoc fire committee) has any prior experience or training as fire fighters.

Their report states: “There were meetings with many constituencies including the volunteers....”

We assume they became educated as they conducted their research and due diligence.

Most of us would think our volunteer fire fighters would be the first group they spoke. In fact, last Thursday was the first the volunteers heard about this initiative.

Our Fire Fighters were provided the background document for this meeting which outlines the rationale for a decision that had obviously already been made. They were not asked for input. They offered it

anyway over a two-hour period. Council member Rich and Mayor Slayton expressed no interest in expert points of view. At no time did they take one note.

During their Q&A with the volunteer fire fighters Councilwoman Rich admitted that their research and diligence did not include checking with the three communities that were originally merged into the Gold Ridge District to understand satisfaction and potential issues that should be considered in the negotiations.

The council told our volunteers that they were incapable of seeing the “big picture”. Councilwoman Rich and Mayor Slayter were not aware that our volunteer leaders have been or are employed as very senior members of larger fire departments in Sonoma County. They are familiar first-hand with issues such as capabilities and culture of departments that might be consolidation partners.

Need critical thinking applied to the problem

The staff report recommending consolidation, provided as background to the May 7 meeting includes a section titled advantages and disadvantages. Apparently, they could think of no disadvantages of this monumental change. Some of the benefits seem satisfying but in fact only if you don't know that they already exist.

“Advantages...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 residents of Sebastopol”

All of California uses a “mutual aid” model that scales responses to emergencies based on need. Small incidents are served by a truck from Sebastopol. A structure fire frequently gets a response that includes equipment and manpower from Graton, Gold Ridge, and Santa Rosa. The size of these responses is dictated by regulations and will not be different if Sebastopol Fire Services are outsourced to Gold Ridge.

What will change is the decision making. Priorities for replacing equipment, adding staff, and allocating resources to Sebastopol will be made outside the city limits. We will have one represented in the decision, but the decision will be made in the context of what is best for the entire district which will cover more than 640 square miles, include 15 different fire companies, and have a focus on rural fire fighting. Sonoma County currently oversees much of the district and will be a significant influence on the decisions being made.

Need to address increased cost – Parcel Tax increase?

Mayor Slayter introduced a new requirement for our fire department – full staffing 24/7. This is a costly and possibly unnecessary requirement for Sebastopol. Our current volunteer/full time staff model is fully functioning and meets or exceeds all standards. The option however should be discussed and debated in a public forum. The estimated cost of \$286 included in the proposal is based on the current parcel tax in the Gold Ridge District. It does not include substantial Sebastopol specific for needed station repairs and modern equipment.

Not included in the “comprehensive proposal” supporting this initiative:

- Exactly what a full-time staffing model would deliver.
 - o The prevailing full-time model at Gold Ridge is to provide several full-time staff who are typically fresh recruits from the fire academy and paid \$17/hour.
 - o They will have substantially less experience than our current volunteers.
 - o It appears that pay is lower in Gold Ridge than Sebastopol raising concern about our current full time fire employees about their future.

- The cost to repair our current station and expand to provide dormitory space for full time fire-fighters who will have to sleep and live on long shifts while waiting for calls.

- Funding to upgrade equipment that is currently aged out and in some cases in disrepair due to lack of parts.
 - o It is presumed this neglect will be passed to Gold Ridge Fire Protection District where they will have to raise money.
 - o Since they will be responsible for calculating the parcel tax, it seems likely that there might be a larger final number to pay for necessary upgrades.

Need a full review of all proposals and options considered:

Taxpayers may be less enthusiastic about a parcel tax associated with consolidation with Gold Ridge if they were aware there is also a less expensive option:

- The city could add more full-time staff, upgrade equipment and renovate the fire station.
 - o It would require a parcel tax or for the city to reallocate spending from other priorities. That discussion is not being shared with voters.
 - o A draft proposal suggested this could be done at a much lower cost than consolidation with neighboring districts

- Voters might favor consolidation with the Sonoma County Fire District.
 - o That district parcel tax is a similar value to Gold Ridge.
 - o Services offered to communities in that Fire District include a full-time ambulance service at each station and an option for helicopter medical evacuation.
 - o They appear to get more from every tax dollar invested. Perhaps because they are a larger district and benefit from efficiencies associated with their size and organization.

The point is that citizens should be informed about their options and at least a rationale for why council eliminated those other choices. A full discussion and debate at public meetings would be the democratic solution.

Need to address the impact on our homeowner's insurance rates

Not explained in the document is what consideration has been given to the impact of the change on our homeowners insurance rates. Many in the community know firsthand the challenges of getting and paying for homeowners insurance given the increase in fires in Sonoma County. We in Sebastopol enjoy excellence in fire protection. In part our insurance costs take into consideration the quality rating of our fire protection.

Sebastopol currently is rated to receive the lowest homeowner rates based on the high quality of the department. Your city Council however plans to vote on Tuesday to disband the Sebastopol Fire Department and outsource our protection to the Gold Ridge Fire District.

There is no discussion in the document for the impact of the change on our ratings.

- What is the Gold Ridge Fire District Rating currently? What impact will be combining the two services have on insurance coverage and rates?
- When will they be re-rated? What actions will Council take if our insurance rates are increased due to a decreased rating for the combined service?

How many of us will be unable to get or afford homeowners insurance?

Need to discuss what will happen to money for Chief's salary and current support and equipment fund

The Mayor and Councilwoman Rich already state in the report that the primary motivation for this change is financial. "The municipal budget is constrained and there are many unmet needs City-wide."

There is no discussion in the proposal for what will happen to the current taxpayer dollars going to fire protection. Mayor Slater told our fire fighters that that money will be appropriated each year and increased by inflation. It will be interesting to see if current 8% inflation rate will be used annually?

They state the Fire Chief will not be replaced which will free up substantial sum of money to be used for other purposes. Perhaps to pay for the salary increases already given to our city leadership team.

Need to let Council know that the community wants a voice in critical decisions such as how our fire protection is structured.

Clearly, burying the issues under agenda descriptions as banal as "Read-out from ad-hoc fire committee" once again misleads the casual reader to the significance of the document and topic which deserves community scrutiny. It should read "Possible Dissolution and Consolidation of Sebastopol Fire Service."

I have heard that at least one council member not on the ad-hoc committee did not feel this issue was one that the community needed to have a say in. Our fire fighters asked a pointed question about why they as experts, with a vested interest both as volunteers and citizens were not consulted. They were told they did not have the ability to see the "big picture".

This is a pattern we have seen consistently with this council. New wireless water meters buried in a proposal to fund energy saving capital improvements. Critical votes to establish homeless shelters in the city limits made late into the night and then reversed when obvious flaws in the plan are uncovered by local experts.

The Citizens of Sebastopol need a full explanation of each of the options available by individuals competent to discuss them and answer questions. A decision of this importance should have been the topic of several public meetings.

We should hear:

- Proposals from Gold Ridge, Sonoma County Fire District, and our own Fire Department
- We should hear the concerns of business owners, insurers, local real estate professionals and our current volunteers
- We should understand the real cost of making required changes including cost of equipment and station upgrades and impact on our Homeowners insurance rates.

We all deserve a voice in such an important decision.

We should be concerned about a vote to move forward with negotiations with Gold Ridge

Not stated is that the negotiations with Gold Ridge are initially to have them provide leadership to the department given the decision has been made not to replace our fire chief. We have people in the department that are well equipped to provide excellent leadership however, the Council is ignoring this option.

Once we start down this path there will be statements by Council that the final decision will be in the up to the parcel holders of Sebastopol. The proposed mechanism takes advantage of a loophole in state law that avoids a ballot initiative which requires 2/3 approval to pass. A "protest hearing" will be held. IF 25% of Landowners do not show up and vote no...the parcel tax is approved without any vote. If 25% of landowners object an election is held but it only requires more than 50% to vote yes for approval.

Background for this meeting state the process will take a year. If voters refuse to fund the proposal, what will be the state of the Sebastopol Fire Department after a year of neglect? What will be morale among volunteers being led by another Fire District? What decisions on equipment and training will be deferred? What will be the impact on response times during the upcoming fire season? Who will be accountable if service is not up to standards?

Council Members may say that Gold Ridge is the best cultural fit with our department. Further because Sebastopol will be much larger part of the new district which is currently only made up of Hessel, Twin Hills, and Freestone. It may not be stated that Gold Ridge is currently entering negotiations to consolidate County Service Area 40 – 640 square miles of unincorporated area throughout Sonoma County. Sonoma County currently administers this area. There are 15 different Volunteer Fire Companies made up of 240 volunteers. Much of their equipment is more outdated than ours.

Conclusion:

Many questions unanswered. After a very limited due diligence effort, the Council tonight proposes to vote to end a tradition in Sebastopol of a dedicated Municipal Volunteer Fire Department that began in 1902. Hopefully many citizens of Sebastopol will join me in calling for further assessment of the options without the constraints of secrecy. In fact, once proper diligence is done there needs to be public meetings with clear and factual presentations of the options including opposing positions.

Lee Mathias - Sebastopol