

City of Sebastopol Fire Service strategic planning and future

In 2019 our City of Sebastopol Fire Service, in discussion with past council informed them our city fire department was

- **Behind in updating our firefighting apparatus**
- **Our fire station needs maintenance and upgrade**
- **Our staffing model was strained**

As a result of this information, which was not surprising given significant past council fire service underfunding, our city manager chose to quietly initiate exclusive explorative discussions with other local fire departments, and council formed an Ad Hoc committee in 2022 to explore ideas.

Also in in early 2022 a '**Short and Long Term Plan for the Future of the Sebastopol Fire Department**' document was submitted to our City Council Ad Hoc Fire Committee (Council Members **Slyater** and **Rich**) by CoS Fire department officers. This document discussed an informed and practical phased update plan to maintain the high level of service our Sebastopol community currently enjoys while remaining an independent department of the City.

Presumably due to council oversight, this Fire department strategic plan document was not included in the packets of our community's May 17, 2022 council meeting, and to my knowledge was not considered or discussed by the Ad Hoc committee as an alternative to consolidation ideas at any time.

There is in reality no decision making urgency on our needed upgrades and improvements. Our local urban volunteer city fire service continues to operate in a highly efficient way both in our specialized small urban core city area and in assisting other local rural fire services (and vice versa), which in some cases brings funds **into** the city thanks to our volunteers working on NorCal summer wild fires.

Despite this, the city manager and council subsequently chose to explore county merger ideas including the viability of requesting annexing our fire department to Gold Ridge fire service, a rural fire service to our south with no major towns or cities that serves roughly 25,000 residents across 75 square miles.

The council chose to engage 'Matrix', a 15 year old nationwide Fire/EMS consulting company, to explore the pluses and minuses of their merger concept,

and Matrix have now produced a document and presentation containing their thoughts on this.

This outside consultant perspective is an expensive but small part of the overall puzzle - **whatever happens in the future, our City of Sebastopol community will have to invest in our fire service, its facilities and apparatus** - whether it remains as is, or if our budget, staffing and services is ceded to control by Gold Ridge's board of directors.

We currently currently only have a binary 'option A or B' being discussed, but as then council member Gurney said in the May 17 2022 meeting, 'what are the other options A,B,C,D, E or...?'

The key issue here is **the best way forward for our city tax payer community**, and in this initial contemplation of the Matrix consulting company's presented ideas we have to factor in bearing the increased parcel taxes and bonds we will be paying for staffing, vehicle replacement and fire station upgrades - **regardless of whether those funds flow to our independent City Fire Department or if they are controlled by the Gold Ridge board of directors.**

Based on the numbers presented by Matrix, if Gold Ridge has control of these city tax payer funds, **there are significant financial disadvantages to city of Sebastopol citizens, coupled with very significant increased costs.** We have already had a well meaning hospital bond that failed to meet intended objectives but has caused much anger amongst our citizens, who continue to have to pay for that failed project each year.

Thankfully there are no urgent factors in our fire department modernization community decision making process, so we will have plenty of time to find the most cost effective and efficient way forward.

We will have a new city manager in June, and this vitally important Fire department decision should not be made before that key city staff position has digested the pros and cons of strategizing for our citizens best interests and understood the dynamics involved.

We have three rookie councillors who are only a month into learning the ropes of local bureaucracies. We have a current vice mayor who was a former member of last year's Ad Hoc committee who publicly stated when in that role a desire to merge with Gold Ridge.

Given all these immature pieces of the puzzle and lack of visibility into new councillor allegiances and political goals, **hasty decisions on a non reversible ceding of our fire service to outside management is an extremely bad idea, with great potential for expensive failure.**

Last years autocratic council chose to exclude local subject matter experts from discussion - our local fire officers and our priceless local volunteers - which caused considerable city citizen outrage and frustration.

As a community we must include **all** stakeholders in any future decisions over such a fundamental strategic path.

The past process was badly broken and now needs to be rebooted.

I recommend a next step is to **create a genuine stakeholder working group** to explore options - council and city staff, fire officers, fire fighter volunteers, local citizens and local business owners. Study of and comparisons with successful local models such as Healdsburg Fire department and analysis of past mergers - such as Freestone ceding control to Gold Ridge and arguably losing a lot of local civic pride and cohesion in the process - should be considered, along with historical results and thoughts of citizens.

This working group can come back to our community in a town hall meeting format with a report and present preferred options of the best path forward for public discussion.

I look forward to hearing our interim Fire chief's analysis, perspectives and opinion of the Matrix report on Tuesday following the Matrix consultant's slide deck read out.

There is a lot of financial detail I could add here but I'm sure council will quickly realize and discuss that the merger numbers are not attractive, and that there is serious misrepresentation of "Gold Ridge Tax Revenue" **which is in reality parcel tax income from City of Sebastopol property taxes donated to Gold Ridge.** Assuming common sense prevails there will be plenty of time this year to crunch the numbers.

In conclusion to this public comment

Maintaining LOCAL CONTROL IS **HUGE**, and **SMALL** IS BEAUTIFUL and manageable.

Our county bureaucracy is notorious for being very poorly organized, slow, profligate and opaque.

Let's not rush into anything unless we are sure it is in the best interests of city of Sebastopol tax payers, renters and business owners. Council has a fiduciary duty to enable the best quality services from our tax base and to drive greater revenue into our city coffers.

We've had ten years of city mismanagement in a growing economy. We are now in the jaws of a serious recession. Let's focus on growing our local economy again so we can fund and staff all our city services and have funds left over for altruism.

Losing control to our very poorly managed and run county would be disaster for our city and irreversible.

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Downtown Sebastopol