

City Councilmembers, Staff, and Residents,

I am writing to express my deep concerns regarding the proposed consolidation of Sebastopol's fire services into the Gold Ridge Fire Protection District. While the Fire Ad Hoc Committee frames this as a cost-saving measure that improves services, a closer analysis reveals that the plan primarily serves to shift financial responsibility away from the City's General Fund and onto residents through a new parcel tax, while simultaneously relinquishing local control over critical emergency services. The City's fire station and equipment would be permanently transferred to Gold Ridge, with no clear assurances that Sebastopol's needs will remain a priority in the long term. The purported "economies of scale" are overstated, as the staffing models under both consolidation and standalone options are nearly identical. Furthermore, the public has had insufficient opportunity to weigh in on this major restructuring of essential services, with a rushed timeline that limits meaningful input. I urge the Council to reconsider this consolidation and explore alternative models that maintain local control, financial transparency, and a truly equitable approach to sustaining fire services in Sebastopol.

## 1. The Parcel Tax Shift: Financial Burden on Residents

- The consolidation proposal **shifts the financial burden from the City's General Fund to residents through a parcel tax**, which amounts to **\$265 per year for a single-family home**. This appears to be a way for the City to offload fire service costs to taxpayers without their direct input.
- The report states that **a standalone model would also require a parcel tax**, but this assumption is built into the consultant's framing rather than being a necessary conclusion. The City could explore other funding models, including grants or reallocation of budgetary resources, before resorting to a tax.
- While the city argues that a standalone model would be more expensive, the estimated **General Fund contribution for fire services under consolidation is \$1.1M, compared to \$2.18M for an independent fire department**. This \$1.1M difference conveniently aligns with the amount that would be collected from residents through the parcel tax, suggesting that this is **not a true cost-saving measure, but a tax shift**.

## 2. Lack of Local Control & Governance Issues

- The City's fire services would be **absorbed by Gold Ridge**, a separate entity with its own elected board. While the City claims that the reorganization retains "local control," this is misleading:
  - The **Gold Ridge Fire Board is not directly accountable to Sebastopol residents**, making it harder for the city to influence decisions regarding fire services.
  - Future decisions about staffing, response times, and equipment investments will be made by **Gold Ridge leadership, not Sebastopol's elected officials**.
  - If the **parcel tax is increased in the future**, residents may not have a direct say in those decisions.

## 3. Misleading "Economies of Scale" Argument

- The City argues that **joining Gold Ridge will result in "better services at a lower cost" due to economies of scale**, but this is **not fully supported by the financials**:
  - The actual **staffing levels in both models (standalone vs. reorganization) are nearly identical**:
    - Both models propose **3 Fire Captains, 3 Fire Engineers, and 3 Firefighters**.
    - Both models rely on a **volunteer pool** (30 under Gold Ridge, 178 under standalone).
  - The main difference is that **Gold Ridge provides additional administrative and training roles**, but it is unclear how much of these will directly improve fire response in Sebastopol.
  - **If Gold Ridge were truly more cost-efficient, it should be able to provide superior services without relying on a new parcel tax on residents**. The need for a parcel tax contradicts the "economies of scale" argument.

#### 4. Loss of City-Owned Fire Assets (Without Clear Benefits)

- The City's fire station and all fire engines will be transferred to Gold Ridge, which means:
  - The City loses direct control of its fire infrastructure.
  - If Gold Ridge decides to relocate fire services away from Sebastopol in the future, the city has **no recourse**.
  - The fire station transfer agreement contains a **weak reversion clause**: the station **only reverts to the City if it is no longer used for fire services**. However, Gold Ridge **can sell the station as long as it builds a replacement within city limits**.
  - There is no **guarantee** that a future replacement station would be as centrally located or beneficial to the City.
  - **Gold Ridge is not required to invest additional funding to modernize the fire station**—it will use Measure H funds (\$5M) which would otherwise remain under City control.

#### 5. Alternative Approaches Were Not Fully Explored

- The report does not consider other alternatives such as:
  - A regional fire service agreement that allows cost-sharing while keeping local control.
  - A special district under Sebastopol's control, rather than annexing into Gold Ridge.
  - Hiring additional paid staff and expanding volunteer recruitment while keeping fire services city-owned.
- The Citygate consultant's analysis appears designed to validate the consolidation rather than explore all possible funding and staffing models.

#### 6. Timeline is Rushed, Limiting Public Input

- The City is fast-tracking approval:
  - LAFCO is set to approve this in March 2025, with implementation as soon as July 2025.
  - The public protest period is only 50 days, and a special election is only triggered if 25% of property owners formally protest—a high bar.
  - Residents are being asked to accept a permanent fire district consolidation without a full independent review or citizen vote.

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#### Conclusion: Fire Service Consolidation is a Backdoor Tax Increase That Reduces Local Control

- This is not a cost-saving measure; it is a financial burden shift from the City to residents via a parcel tax.
- Sebastopol will lose direct control over fire services and its own fire station.
- The benefits of "economies of scale" are overstated and not clearly substantiated by the staffing model.
- Alternative funding options were not fully explored.
- The public has not been given sufficient opportunity to weigh in on this major decision.

Given these concerns, the City Council should reject the consolidation proposal and pursue a more thorough evaluation of alternative funding models before permanently relinquishing Sebastopol's fire services to Gold Ridge.