

Public Comment from Mosquito

Date: 21 October 2019
To: El Dorado County LAFCO <lafco@edlafco.us>
Re: Public Comment on Item 10 of Agenda for October 23, 2019 (Consolidation of Fire Districts)
From: Charles Schnell, 6612 Log Cabin Lane, Placerville 95667

Let me offer some personal appreciations as a relatively recent arrival to Mosquito (2015), active in support of the Fire Safe Council, the Property Owners Association, and the Fire District.

Originally all volunteer, the Mosquito Fire Protection District (MFPD) became a combination department in 1988 with a paid Chief. Until about 2015 volunteer numbers ranged between 15 and 30, with steady recruitment and retention. Typically involved were residents who worked elsewhere as paid firefighters, and others who trained locally to qualify as firefighters.

Around 2014-2016, the MFPD Board underwent considerable upheaval, leading to the resignation of 4 of 5 board members and the need for the County Board of Supervisors to reconstitute it. Disaffection among the firefighters led to the loss of many volunteers. A series of temporary chiefs followed, with limited ability to recruit and retain volunteers. This political crisis is behind us but has left us short on both volunteers and funding.

Resources for volunteer recruitment & retention have diminished, due to the loss of a spirited team of experienced volunteers (largely self-replicating), and to a fiscal crunch that greatly limits spending. Causes of the crunch include increased dependence on paid staffing, accumulated inflation, and the ending in FY 2014-2015 of county subsidies. This led to budget deficits in recent years, partly mitigated by growing alternative revenue sources (e.g., strike teams and grants).

In response to this situation, the MFPD Board has sponsored a strategic planning process. Beginning in May 2019 it focused on two major challenges:

- 1) insufficient revenues to fund coverage of more than 8 hours daily by paid firefighters, and thus the necessity of re-building the volunteer component to expand coverage; and
- 2) the need to rebuild community support and regain constituent confidence at the same time, as a basis not only for re-establishing volunteer levels, local funding efforts, and willingness to support tax measures, but also to meet the challenges of community risk reduction.

The strategic plan draft was vetted in several public workshops and approved at the October 17, 2019 MFPD Board meeting. It contains sections on Financial Stability, Community Risk Reduction, Emergency Service Provision, Community Engagement, and Governance. Now MFPD will pivot to the task of developing operational plans to attain the goals in each area.

Having such a plan is key to providing overall direction to the District's efforts and to communicating with more clarity with the public not only what we are doing but also what help we need from them on

a number of fronts, and why. [Note that the lack of a plan was a significant contributing factor in the narrow loss of the recent parcel fee measure.]

The MFPD, while far from out of the woods, currently enjoys some favorable conditions to pursue its strategic goals, particularly in terms of rebuilding the volunteer contingent and corresponding levels of community support that will enable it to improve its service coverage and its financial position.

Hopeful, improving scenarios include community relations on the mend, a renewed Board with strengthened links to local organizations, and some positive economic situations: the District's lack of debt, significant reserve funds, low overhead on personnel, and high parcel fees both differentiate it from neighboring small fire districts and provide a platform with which to pursue additional, contingent sources of funding like fee-for-service work (e.g., strike and incident management teams) and grants. Recent FEMA grants totaling \$870,000 for training and for volunteer recruitment and retention over the next four years will help get the ball moving on the strategic plan, as will the \$720,000 in fuel reduction and defensible space funding currently being implemented by the Fire Safe Council in partnership with MFPD and other community organizations.

Conclusions.

1. I believe that the MFPD needs breathing room—a space of two to three years to try pulling itself up by the bootstraps, carrying out strategic initiatives without the pressure of immanent consolidation. Talk of consolidation tends to undermine community support and willingness to undertake new commitments, volunteer efforts as well as financial. In particular, the possibility of approaching voters again for a parcel fee increase based on the new plan and its initial success would be undercut. Few will agree to tax themselves more if they fear it will go largely to supporting other districts which have been unwilling to make similar sacrifices.
2. If consideration of consolidation (and the additional funding it would doubtless require) were delayed, we would learn the answers to two questions that today are unclear. First, is the MFPD able to make good on its hopes? If so, consolidation may be moot, or at least could be planned under more favorable conditions. Second, is the Mosquito bridge going to be a reality? If so, any planning for consolidation should consider looking south, where emergency response times would be 20 minutes or less, as opposed to joining with entities to the north, from which response times are more than doubled.
3. Each of El Dorado County's fire departments developed in its own historical context. While consolidation is in principle a sensible notion, in practice it is difficult given the different situations that have evolved and the disparities among resources available. Small rural Districts like Mosquito lack the tax base that supports the larger places and receive a smaller portion of the property taxes that are collected; yet we shop in their business districts and help enlarge their tax base. Rather than limit itself to joining the most underfunded fire departments in shared penury, consolidation should focus on equitable use of county-wide emergency service resources to achieve comparable levels of safety for all.

Thank you for your consideration.