

Re: City Council Meeting Agenda of April 16, 2024, Item 5. Fire Department Ad Hoc Committee, on the Future of Fire Delivery Services for the City of Sebastopol

To the Honorable Mayor and Members of the Sebastopol City Council:

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Council at this juncture, as you make decisions on how best to revamp the delivery of fire services. I have a few questions which I hope will contribute to a thoughtful discussion.

Question 1. Before the choice of future partners was narrowed down to Gold Ridge FPD and Graton FPD, did the City consider joining with Sonoma County FD?

Viewing the map of County of Sonoma Fire Agencies (Committee Report, page 180), it appears that the City shares borders with three neighboring fire agencies: Gold Ridge (west and south), Graton (north), and Sonoma County (east). The Sonoma County Fire Department has grown in recent years, and news reports indicate that some of the outlying fire districts in West County, which also struggle with staffing and funding challenges, have considered joining Sonoma County FD. This gives Sonoma County FD experience with mergers – cited as one of the advantages of Gold Ridge vs. Graton.

With additional agencies contemplating mergers, what impact will these have on the overall map of fire service agencies, in terms of service, cost savings and access to funding?

Question 2. How would the existing parcel taxes of the Gold Ridge FPD (or other merger partner) apply to property owners in the City, and does this make sense?

If the City decides to merge with Gold Ridge FPD, it will amount to one of the largest property tax increases the City has ever seen, immediately imposing three separate parcel taxes approved by Gold Ridge District voters back in 1997, 2008, and 2019, with a projected revenue of \$1.1 million – a huge bump to the City’s existing General Fund allocation of \$1.6 million for fire services. (See Committee Report, page 7. These tax measures are attached to the Report, beginning at pages 32, 40, and 51 respectively.) The Gold Ridge parcel taxes each have different formulations, based on property assessment classes, such as residential, commercial (2019 Measure E includes a square footage charge), undeveloped, and pasture.

How will parcel taxes, which originated in a largely rural and agricultural service area, translate when applied in a built-out town, with much smaller lots and relatively dense commercial zones? Have city leaders, residents and business interests had a chance to consider the impacts? How do the calls for service (both fire and medical) compare, between sparsely vs. more densely populated service areas?

Question 3. Has consideration been given to the twin losses of control in the event of a merger, namely (a) the loss of representation on the fire district’s governing board and (b) the loss of oversight by the city’s council and administrators?

If maintaining local control and oversight over the delivery of fire services is important enough, the alternative of simply contracting out for services with a neighboring agency is worthy of review.

A parallel example of contracting for services is well known in the law enforcement arena, where many small towns have contracts with local sheriff's agencies. This does not involve any (immediate) new taxes, and the City retains the ability to review and modify terms of service, acting through their councils and city administrators.

Respectfully,
Elizabeth McCarthy