

**DATE:** April 19, 2021

**TO:** Gold Mountain Community Services Board of Directors

**FROM:** Tom Cooley, Chair – Local Emergency Services Study Group  
Cary Curtis, Vice Chair

**SUBJECT:** LOCAL EMERGENCY STUDY GROUP – REORGANIZATION OF FIRE PROTECTION & EMERGENCY SERVICES IN EASTERN PLUMAS COUNTY

The six Study Group agencies have been meeting since February of 2020 to discuss the current state of and challenges that lie ahead for sustaining volunteer fire fighting and emergency medical response services in Eastern Plumas County. Jennifer Stephenson, Executive Officer of Plumas LAFCo, made various presentations leading up to the Study Group's formation. These provided a framework for restructuring options that could be pursued to address issues common to the six agencies and have reached critical levels across the state and country. Additionally, the 2019 Plumas County Grand Jury Report included a finding that fire agencies in the county should evaluate restructuring and recognize the benefits provided. The Study Group was formed from these presentations and conclusions to collaborate on solutions to common issues and identify a path forward for sustainable fire protection and emergency medical response services in Eastern Plumas County.

*The statements contained here about the performance of volunteers in the fire service and their district boards should not be construed as criticism. The scope of those responsibilities has increased dramatically over the recent period while our institutions' structure has not kept pace nor adapted. It is simply time to adapt to changing conditions.*

Common issues identified by the Study Group are broken into three categories –

1. **Volunteers** – a significant decline in volunteerism, inability to attract fully-qualified individuals, high turnover, increased demand for training and certification, increased regulatory requirements and accreditation required of volunteer Chiefs, training officers and administrators, and specific response techniques are not consistent. Still, the expectation is for agencies to perform as one unit.
2. **Financial Constraints** – inconsistent year-over-year revenue, limited county tax sharing, minimal parcel taxes that do not include inflation factors, and increasing operating costs persist throughout the area.
3. **Outdated District Boundaries** – growth patterns not updated, islands of property, not part of a district even though a district encircles the parcels. These "islands" receive services from the closest fire department but do not contribute to the cost for those services.

Below is a summary of actions the Study Group has taken to support the selection of a reorganizational option to improve fire and emergency medical services' safety and economy.

Key Action	Outcome
Group discussion with CALFIRE Unit Chief Scott Packwood	Identification of minimal resources supported by CALFIRE that could assist the Group's effort
Presentation of options by Jennifer Stephenson, Executive Officer Plumas LAFCo	Understanding of 4 restructuring options* available to the Group with a <b>recommendation from LAFCo of forming a new District as the most viable option</b>
MOU adopted by participating six agencies	Cohesive Group with common goals that is working well together
Request for Plumas LAFCo to consider fee waiver	LAFCo agrees to waive \$12,000 in fees. The current estimate of LAFCo fees before a waiver is \$25,000
Presentations of reorganization options by legal counsels for Beckwourth Fire and the City of Portola	Viewpoint based on experience and legal requirements of the four restructuring options available to the Group with an <b>opinion of forming a new District as the approach that fits the need of the six agencies</b>
Vote by the six participating board representatives on reorganization option to pursue	<b>October 7, 2020</b> – a vote of the six agency board representatives unanimously agreed to form a new district and request approval of this option from each of their respective boards.
Vote by the City Council of the City of Portola on the option to form a new district in Eastern Plumas County for Fire Protection and Emergency Service Response	The option was supported by a unanimous vote by the Portola City Council to move forward with forming a new district at the Regular Meeting of the Council on October 28, 2020.  <b>Note:</b> Five of the six participating agencies' board of directors have now voted and confirmed their desire to move forward with the recommendation to form a new fire protection district in Eastern Plumas County. <i>Sierra Valley Fire has not responded with the formality of a vote of their board. A verbal commitment statement has been received.</i>
Group representatives consulted with Plumas County Administrator and County Counsel to explore finance and tax sharing options for the proposed new fire district.	Representatives met on November 18, 2020. County representatives recognized challenges faced by fire districts in the county. They agreed to consider standardizing existing tax sharing dollar rates across all parcels of a new district but would not commit to additional funding for a new fire district.

\*Four restructuring options –

- 1) Joint Powers Agreement for some or all services. Often ends in dissolution.
- 2) Consolidation of districts with substantially similar resolutions.
- 3) Annexation into one surviving Agency.
- 4) Dissolution of all and formation of an entirely new district.

### **The decision to Form a New District**

At its October 7, 2020 meeting, the Study Group unanimously approved a motion to advance the restructuring study to establish a new fire district. The Study Group examined the benefits of the four available options; creating a new district stood out as the preferred solution. With this solution, an entirely new agency is formed, and existing providers are dissolved. Dissolution and/or cessation of fire services occurs by Resolution of each governing board, application to LAFCo, and a protest hearing. The application to LAFCo for forming the new district is by Resolution of the City Council or petition of 25% of registered voters. Upon approval by LAFCo, the formation is submitted to the voters within the new district for approval by a simple majority. (Election may be waived if a petition to initiate formation is signed by at least 51% of registered voters.) The new district's formation is also contingent on approval by 66-2/3% of registered voters of a financing plan. Dissolution of the agencies can be contingent upon the successful formation of the new district.

### **Benefits Aligned with Formation of a New District**

- a) The new district's increased ability to attract qualified individuals for volunteer firefighter positions is due to implementing a hybrid organizational structure. This structure is characterized by paid professional leadership and administration with volunteer firefighters and auxiliary members.
- b) Centralized fire planning and provisions, improved coordination with area fire districts and agencies.
- c) Better leveraging of resources.
- d) Consistency in policies and practices.
- e) Cost savings/efficiencies – elimination of duplication such as administration.
- f) Improved uniform training standards, performance, incident oversight
- g) Possible enhanced positioning for grant application and awards with the larger fire district.
- h) New logical service boundaries.
- i) Could address funding with tax measure that includes all served properties.
- j) Regional planning and implementation.
- k) A fresh start that creates one identity for all served.
- l) A single board of directors comprised of registered voters from the newly formed district.

### **Next Steps**

Fire Study Group request that a Resolution prepared for each participating Agency be presented to their respective governing boards to affirm by Resolution that:

- 1) The Agency is obligated in good faith as a Participating Agency to the completion of a feasibility study that is acceptable to the participating agencies and the LAFCo application requirements; and
- 2) The Agency is obligated to its share of the cost of such study, as mutually agreed to by all of the Participating Agencies, through the completion of the said feasibility study that meets requirements of participating agencies and LAFCo.

The Study Group has drafted a Request for Proposal for a consultant or consulting firm to develop a Feasibility Study. Legal counsel and editors will soon review it. This action will pave the way for publishing the RFP for a cost proposal for services.

A discussion on shared cost took place at the March 23, 2021, Study Group meeting. Data obtained (appendix A) to potentially help identify an equitable share cost or percentage of shared cost is inconclusive for formulating a recommendation. The Group recommends that each participating Agency determine a maximum dollar figure for which the board would commit to the Initial Project Cost to Start of \$45,500. No legal requirements are regulating how much any participating agency would need to contribute to a restructuring process. The cost-sharing recommendations from the Study Group will require a vote of acceptance from each respective board.

GMCSB Board agreement to move forward with an examination of the formation of a new fire district in no way obligates the District to take part in future steps beyond the feasibility study.

#### **COST ESTIMATE**

<b>Description and order due</b>	<b>Fee paid to</b>	<b>Cost</b>
1. RFP Legal Review	Agency Attorney	\$500 estimate
2. Municipal Service Review/Sphere of Influence Update	LAFCo	n/a
3. Consultant Feasibility Study	Consultant	\$40,000
4. Initial Community Outreach	As needed	\$5,000
<b>Initial project cost to Start.</b>		<b>\$45,500</b>
<b>*Decision Point to Continue</b>		

Description and order due	Fee paid to	Cost
5. Formation application	LAFCo	\$10,450
6. CEQA Notice of Exemption	LAFCo	\$400
7. GIS Deposit	LAFCo	\$200
8. Dissolution x 3 @ \$2,000 ea. (SVFD, BFD, EPRFD)	LAFCo	\$6,000
9. Relinquishment x 3@\$2,750 ea. (C-Road CSD, GMCSO, City of Portola)	LAFCo	\$8,250
LAFCo approved fee reduction		-\$12,000
<b>Total LAFCo application and approval costs</b>		<b>\$13,300</b>
*Board of Supervisors place formation and taxation proposals on the ballot for voters within boundaries of the proposed new fire district		
*Note: Plumas County Fees would not be due until the next regular election cycle.		
10. Plumas Election Costs	Plumas County	*Pending
*New district and funding approved by voters.		
11. Mapping and Legal Description	Surveyor	\$5,000
12. Plumas County Tax Assessor fees	Plumas County	No charge
<b>Total Plumas County Fees</b>		<b>\$5,000</b>
13. Board of Equalization costs over 2,000 acres (can be deferred for a year w/business plan)	State of CA	\$3,500
<b>Total Project Costs</b>		<b>*\$67,300</b>

\*Plus, pending election costs.