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THE WEST COUNTY FIRE PROTECTION MONTAGE

Is the Inter-Agency Emergency Response Model Meeting Expectations?

SUMMARY

Seven different departments provide fire protection and emergency medical response to the residents of western Contra Costa County. Each department has its own elected governing body, its own budget, and its own traditions. Because of their modest sizes, these departments must rely on each other to field a force large enough to deal with fires and medical emergencies. Approximately 90 percent of the emergency calls are for medical aid rather than fires.

Can this system of inter-department cooperation work? Surprisingly, it does. And, it has worked remarkably well for decades. Yet, there are problems and irritations.

The Contra Costa County Grand Jury interviewed a number of fire protection professionals in West County, and identified differences from department to department regarding scheduling, training, medical expertise, communications, dispatching, and funding.

The Grand Jury concluded that most, if not all, of the glitches in the system are either being addressed by these professionals, or that solutions are available. The Grand Jury does not believe it is necessary to alter the political landscape in West County to resolve operational differences to provide effective fire protection and emergency services.

Credit must be given to the emergency professionals who for decades have efficiently responded to the needs of the public without regard for political boundaries. The Grand Jury urges the West County fire departments to continue to work together to assure the highest level of protection for residents and property. We applaud the political leaders who have allowed their fire departments to work in harmony with each other for many years.

The complete report is available on the Contra Costa County's Grand Jury web site: www.cc-courts.org/grandjury

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY GRAND JURY REPORT 0707

THE WEST COUNTY FIRE PROTECTION MONTAGE

Is the Inter-Agency Emergency Response Model Meeting Expectations?

**To: Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors
Richmond City Council
San Pablo City Council**

BACKGROUND

Fire protection and emergency medical response in western Contra Costa County (“West County”) are provided by a combination of seven separate jurisdictions, each with its own governing body, personnel, equipment, and traditions.

The Contra Costa County Grand Jury interviewed a number of fire protection professionals in West County, and identified differences from department to department regarding scheduling, training, medical expertise, communications and dispatching, and funding levels.

Three of the West County jurisdictions (El Cerrito, Richmond, and Pinole) are municipal fire departments operated by incorporated cities, two are independent special districts (Kensington and Rodeo-Hercules), and one (San Pablo) is part of the consolidated dependent district that provides fire and emergency services to much of central Contra Costa County. The Crockett-Carquinez Fire District is a volunteer department.

Despite differences, for many years these jurisdictions have agreed to automatically provide each other with assistance. Using an “automatic aid” system, no departments need call for assistance. Instead, departments automatically respond to the needs of neighboring departments without being asked.

The user of emergency services, often a resident who dials 911, usually does not notice the differences among the jurisdictions. That means that the cooperation among these agencies is working, each department dedicated to providing prompt and professional response to any emergency in West County.

The current level of cooperation has not always prevailed. Five years ago, the city of Richmond ended its cooperation with the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District (“CCCFPD”), which covers much of El Sobrante, San Pablo, and nearby unincorporated areas (see 2005-2006 Grand Jury Report 0609).

In July 2006, Richmond and CCCFPD entered into a new agreement, and the cooperation has resumed. However, operational differences persist, including varying levels of medical training, different communication systems, different response procedures, and different funding formulas.

Following a review of the West County fire and emergency protection montage, it is easy to conclude that a consolidation of all departments into a single agency would be logical. However, the Grand Jury has concluded, as did the last study commissioned by various stakeholders, that consolidation would not solve the discrepancies in funding, nor is it necessary to resolve the issues surrounding communications, training, dispatch, purchasing, or medical expertise. All of these issues can be addressed through agreements among the agencies, similar to those in effect for geographic area coverage. Currently, there is insufficient political will among most West County jurisdictions to consolidate agencies, although Pinole, Rodeo-Hercules, and CCCFPD are discussing a study for their three areas.

Meanwhile, credit must be given to the leadership in these departments that automatically respond to the needs of the others without regard to geographic or jurisdictional boundaries, or administrative irritations.

FINDINGS

Governance

1. The five-member elected County Board of Supervisors is the governing body of the Contra Costa County Fire Protection District. San Pablo and nearby unincorporated areas, including much of El Sobrante, are within the jurisdiction of CCCFPD.
2. The nine-member elected Richmond City Council is the governing body of the Richmond Fire Department.
3. The Kensington Fire Protection District is governed by a five-member elected board. By contract, the El Cerrito Fire Department provides emergency services to the Kensington district as well as to the City of El Cerrito; El Cerrito is governed by a five-member City Council. The five-member elected Pinole City Council is the governing body of the Pinole Fire Department. The five-member elected board of the Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District is the governing body of the Rodeo-Hercules Fire Department. The Crockett-Carquinez Fire District has a volunteer fire department.
4. By agreement with CCCFPD, the Pinole and El Cerrito Fire Departments provide fire protection and emergency medical response to their respective cities and to adjacent unincorporated areas.

Automatic Aid

5. All West County fire protection agencies, with the exception of Richmond from 2002 to 2006, automatically respond to fire or medical emergency calls without regard for geographic or jurisdictional boundaries. By long-standing agreement among these agencies, the closest engines respond to calls. This system is referred to as “automatic aid.” Automatic aid is distinguished from “mutual aid,” which requires the agency where the call originated to evaluate the situation, and then call for help from adjoining departments, a process that takes additional time. Some of the West County automatic aid agreements are not in writing.
6. In all West County departments, an engine company is made up of a captain, an engineer, and a firefighter.

Medical

7. Excluding non-emergency calls, approximately 90% of calls to West County departments are for medical emergencies rather than fires.
8. One member of each Richmond fire engine company is also an emergency medical technician (“EMT”). EMTs have completed a minimum of 120 hours of classroom and clinical training, and hold an EMT license. The County’s ambulance franchisee, American Medical Response, responds to Richmond calls with its paramedics, but fire engines usually arrive first.
9. Other than Richmond, all other West County engine companies include a paramedic. Unlike EMTs, paramedics have completed a minimum of 1,100 hours of classroom and clinical training, involving supervised experience in an ambulance, and are trained in advanced life support protocols, including cardiac, and drug administration.
10. The County Emergency Medical Services agency (“EMS”) provides a \$30,000 annual subsidy for each engine company with a paramedic. For the past two years, the EMS has been holding Richmond’s subsidy. These funds, which now total approximately \$360,000, could be used by Richmond to help with the start-up costs for providing paramedic services.
11. When other departments respond to calls in Richmond, they arrive with paramedics, but when Richmond responds to calls in neighboring areas, they do so without paramedics.

First Response

12. Typically, the first response to a structure fire call includes three engines--two pumpers with hand tools and medical supplies, a truck with ladder and heavy tools, and a battalion chief. Because of their modest size, all West County fire

departments are dependent on each other for assistance with structure fires and other large blazes.

13. Richmond personnel and equipment respond to fire and emergency calls in CCCFPD's jurisdiction twice as often as CCCFPD responds into Richmond.
14. Richmond and CCCFPD respond to alarms differently. If the request for aid comes from a fire alarm instead of from an individual's call, CCCFPD sends only one engine company. This policy results from the number of false alarms. All other West County departments, including Richmond, send three engines and a truck to all structural fire calls or alarms.

Communications

15. The CCCFPD, Pinole, and Rodeo-Hercules fire departments use a very high frequency ("VHF") radio communications system. Richmond, El Cerrito, and Kensington use an 800-megahertz system ("800 MHz"). All West County engines can communicate on either system; firefighters use the system on which the call originated.
16. Each communication system, VHF and 800 MHz, has its respective technical advantages and disadvantages, with neither being markedly superior to the other. Having more than one system is not necessarily a shortcoming since redundancy could be vital if one system suffers an outage.
17. All engine companies in the County, and most throughout the state, can communicate with each other using the VHF system. Most mutual aid situations are handled using VHF.
18. An East Bay taskforce has been studying "inter-operability;" i.e., police and fire communications in Contra Costa and Alameda counties. Resulting recommendations and associated equipment upgrades will be partially funded using federal Homeland Security funds. A draft Joint Powers Agreement should be ready to distribute to all agencies as early as April 2007. Full inter-operability is expected within five years.

Dispatching

19. The Richmond police and fire communications staff dispatches Richmond, El Cerrito and Kensington fire personnel. Richmond also dispatches many law enforcement agencies operating in West County. CCCFPD dispatches fire companies only, including Pinole, Rodeo-Hercules, and Crockett.
20. When Richmond dispatchers are busy with police calls, there can be a delay in dispatching fire engines. A delay of even a few minutes can lead to the loss of life

and/or property, since within six or seven minutes, the interior temperature can rise until the entire space is engulfed in flames.

Automatic Vehicle Locator

21. The location of each West County fire engine is tracked by satellite using a system called Automatic Vehicle Locator (“AVL”). The AVL system is subsidized by voter-approved Measure H funds (a \$10 per parcel property tax). Funds are administered by the County Emergency Medical Services agency. When a call for aid is received by CCCFPD, the engines expected to arrive in the shortest time based on their AVL location are dispatched. However, since Richmond dispatchers do not use AVL, firefighters assigned to the nearest station are dispatched, regardless of engine location. This has occasionally resulted in some delays.

Financial Support

22. Each West County fire department is dependent on its governing body for funding, and therefore funding varies among the agencies.
23. Historically, the San Pablo Fire District included the incorporated city of San Pablo and some adjoining unincorporated areas. In 1975, the San Pablo Fire District was annexed with the El Sobrante Fire District into the West County Fire District. This consolidated district was dissolved in 1994 and became part of the CCCFPD. As a result of the post-Proposition 13 tax allocations, the area formerly covered by the San Pablo District contributes only about one-third of its costs of operation, equipment, and capital needs.
24. San Pablo’s Redevelopment Agency encourages real estate development. Yet, while fire agencies are charged with protecting new developments, the tax increases generated by the developments go to the Redevelopment Agency. Some of the new tax increases are passed through to CCCFPD by negotiation or by statute, but they are insufficient to support the city’s needs related to fire and medical emergency protection.
25. The CCCFPD’s single engine company located in San Pablo is the busiest in the County, and one of the busiest in California. It has three firefighters on duty at any given time, who respond to a population in excess of 35,000 people. Three firefighters are not sufficient to fight a structure fire, so in every case, the occupants, contents, and structure are at risk until firefighting crews and equipment arrive from other departments in West County.
26. In West County, El Cerrito and Kensington maintain a ratio of one firefighter for every 3,400 in population. Richmond’s ratio is about one for 5,300. Pinole and Rodeo-Hercules maintain one for every 6,000 people. The San Pablo station would require two more engine companies to match Richmond’s ratio.

Meanwhile, it falls to the agencies adjoining the San Pablo area to answer calls on a regular basis in San Pablo and environs.

27. The CCCFPD engine company in San Pablo is housed in temporary structures. It is inadequate to house an additional truck or engine, and another engine company.
28. Richmond terminated its automatic aid agreement with CCCFPD, effective August 1, 2002. The initial reasons given by Richmond were that the assumption of control of two El Sobrante stations by CCCFPD, and CCCFPD's refusal to utilize Richmond's 800 MHz radio, were somehow "unsafe." Later, Richmond claimed it was financially subsidizing CCCFPD, by virtue of its need to respond to an excess number of calls in and around San Pablo, along with dispatching greater numbers of personnel and equipment to the emergency scene. Automatic aid was resumed in July 2006 based upon a written one-year agreement. The agreement requires the agency responding more often to the other agency's calls to reimburse that agency based on an hourly formula that includes the number of firefighters dispatched.
29. In 2007, San Pablo agreed to reimburse CCCFPD up to \$180,000 annually for fire and medical emergency service costs incurred within the city, because of the formula in CCCFPD's written agreement with Richmond. CCCFPD has agreed to augment this sum with up to \$70,000 annually, such funds available for reimbursement to Richmond.
30. Consolidation of all West County fire departments has been studied a number of times, but never adopted. Currently there is not sufficient political support for a total consolidation. Most of the perceived benefits of consolidation can be accomplished by agreements among the West County departments, as has been done so successfully for the coverage of geographic areas.

CONCLUSIONS

West County firefighting professionals have identified a number of areas they believe are in need of correction. However, the Grand Jury concludes that most are either being addressed by the professionals, or that the means to resolve them are available.

1. Despite the disparity in funding from one department to the other, the automatic aid system in West County is working, and the public is being protected. This is a credit to the political and professional leadership in the area.
2. When engines respond into Richmond, they do so with a paramedic on board, but when Richmond responds into other jurisdictions, it sends only an EMT. The lack of paramedics on Richmond fire engines should be corrected as soon as possible. Much of the start-up and operating costs will be underwritten by the County Emergency Medical Services agency.

3. The issues of radio communications are being addressed by an “inter-operability” taskforce comprised of police and firefighters from Contra Costa and Alameda Counties. A draft Joint Powers Agreement may be ready as early as April 2007, and most participants expect to see a single radio system in the two counties within five years. Having two radio systems is not altogether a negative, since redundancy in an emergency may be valuable. Meanwhile, any emergency response delay by Richmond dispatchers forced to deal with police calls could lead to loss of life and/or additional property damage.
4. The quickest response by an engine will be from where it is located, if it is not in its assigned station. Experience with the AVL system has proved it to be so effective, especially in an area like West County with multiple jurisdictions, that Richmond should join the system as soon as possible. This is especially true since the County Emergency Medical Services agency has offered to subsidize much of the costs of conversion to and operation of AVL, using Measure H funds.
5. Some firefighting professionals believe the biggest problem in West County fire protection is the inequality of funding, particularly from the former San Pablo Fire District. The Grand Jury noted discrepancies, but concludes they are not enough to dissolve the mutual cooperation that West County has enjoyed for many years. Funding discrepancies could be resolved to a great extent by establishing a formula-based agreement between CCCFPD and Richmond based upon the actual costs of responses, and agreement between CCCFPD and San Pablo that closely funds actual emergency responses in that city.
6. New construction is needed to remedy shortcomings in the fire station in San Pablo, and to accommodate at least one additional engine company.
7. A consolidation of all West County fire departments has been studied a number of times, but the concept has never been adopted. At this time there is not the political will to consolidate. More importantly, total consolidation does not offer the prospect of addressing any of the current shortcomings in the delivery of services. Much has been done, and more could be done, simply by executing agreements among adjoining agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2006-2007 Contra Costa County Grand Jury recommends:

1. That agreements to respond across agency boundaries be put in writing.
2. That Richmond implement a plan within six months of this report to hire paramedic firefighters, and/or provide paramedic training for some of its firefighters, with a goal of staffing each of its engine companies with a paramedic.

3. That Richmond and CCCFPD participate in the inter-operability studies currently underway, or any that may be undertaken, with the goal of improving inter-agency communications for use in the event of large-scale public emergencies.
4. That Richmond and Contra Costa County budget the funds necessary to implement the recommendations resulting from the inter-operability studies done pursuant to Recommendation #3 or otherwise.
5. That Richmond complete its study of the AVL system, and join the AVL system within six months of this report.
6. That Contra Costa County and Richmond, within six months of this report, enter into a long-term agreement that will fairly compensate for the net difference in cost of emergency responses across Richmond's city limit lines.
7. That Contra Costa County and San Pablo, within six months of this report, enter into an agreement that will provide that San Pablo pay the approximate net difference in costs of automatic aid responses into the city by other agencies.
8. That Contra Costa County, within six months of this report, publish, and within one year adopt, a plan to increase from one to two engine companies within the city or environs of San Pablo.
9. That Contra Costa County, within six months of this report, publish, and within one year adopt, a plan for fire station construction in San Pablo which will provide adequate housing for at least two engines and crews.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Findings:

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors: 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, and 30.

Richmond City Council: 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 26, 28, 29, and 30.

San Pablo City Council: 3, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 29, and 30.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Recommendations:

Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors: 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 9.

Richmond City Council: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6.

San Pablo City Council: 7, 8, and 9.