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El Dorado County fire districts face funding crisis

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Fire chiefs will sit down with local agency representatives and grand jurors to head off a potential funding crisis for several of El Dorado County's rural fire districts.

The Board of Supervisors has warned that the county's fiscal problems likely will end its subsidies to the districts.

Additionally, Supervisor Ron Briggs called for studying other ways to sustain the county's fire protection system.

"We need to get ahead of the problem in terms of funding ... because one day (county subsidies) may go away," Briggs said last week during a discussion with the El Dorado Local Agency Formation Commission, which would conduct the study.

Members of LAFCO, which rules on government reorganizations, said they needed more information about problems the districts face before pursuing solutions.

One option for fire protection – as suggested in an April grand jury report critical of the subsidies – is consolidation, a word that raises hackles among residents who equate it with a loss of community identity and local control.

Rescue Fire Protection District residents in a 2003 advisory vote overwhelmingly rejected a proposal to join with the neighboring El Dorado Hills Fire Department, and at least one resident said his opinion hasn't changed.

Asked in a telephone interview whether he would reconsider consolidation in light of potential funding cuts, Ted Raines responded with an emphatic "Nope."

Raines said he likes the personal relationship the community has with its firefighters.

"I've always liked small," he said. "Small is better. Big is wasteful."

The county allocates about \$1.3 million annually to help fund eight fire districts: Garden Valley, Georgetown, Latrobe, Mosquito, Pioneer and Rescue on the west slope, and Fallen Leaf and Meeks Bay near South Lake Tahoe.

The grand jury report called for ending county subsidies to the six west slope districts and encouraging small districts to consolidate or merge with larger ones.

The grand jurors argued that the subsidies are unfair to taxpayers outside these districts who

support their own fire protection services through various taxes, but also contribute to the subsidized districts via the county's general fund.

Fire officials have complained that the grand jury report missed the mark. Many districts, they say, are functionally consolidated. They share dispatching services, provide mutual aid and work together on equipment purchases.

Consolidations or mergers also aren't short-term solutions to funding cuts, fire officials say, because savings typically don't occur for several years.

Todd Cunningham, chief of the Diamond Springs-El Dorado Fire Protection District, said that, to date, a countywide consolidation has been presented as the solution.

But, he said, "It's hard to ask people to give up egos and give up territory."

LAFCO, he said, could serve as an important "ethical reference" for districts as they study alternatives and present them to the community.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney, a county representative on LAFCO, said one of the strengths of the county's fire protection system is the districts' use of volunteers.

"Knowing the community is important," he said. "The idea that bigger is better is wrong."

The county's ambulance service is operated under a joint powers authority, and Sweeney suggested that might be a better model for fire protection than consolidation.

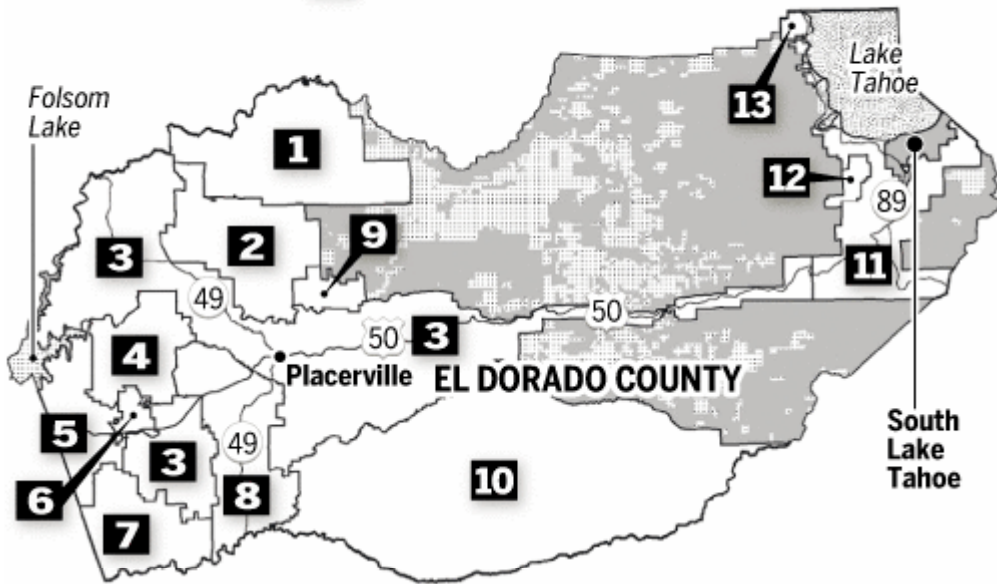
Grand juror Steve Sedgwick said the current grand jury remains interested in fire service issues beyond equity for taxpayers. The panel now has additional information it wants to share, he said, and grand jurors would like to work with the fire chiefs and LAFCO.

Commission members Briggs, Ken Humphreys and Francesca Loftis were appointed to an ad hoc committee to coordinate meetings with representatives of the El Dorado County Fire Chiefs Association and grand jury. They will report back to LAFCO on Feb. 25.

Call The Bee's Cathy Locke, (916) 608-7451.

FIRE DISTRICTS IN EL DORADO COUNTY

-  U.S. Forest Service
-  State Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF); state responsibility areas
- 1** Georgetown Fire Protection
- 2** Garden Valley Fire Protection
- 3** El Dorado County Fire Protection
- 4** Rescue Fire Protection
- 5** El Dorado Hills Fire Department
- 6** Cameron Park Community Services
- 7** Latrobe Fire Protection
- 8** Diamond Springs/El Dorado Fire Protection
- 9** Mosquito Fire Protection
- 10** Pioneer Fire Protection
- 11** Lake Valley Fire Protection
- 12** Fallen Leaf Lake Community Services
- 13** Meeks Bay Fire Protection



Source: El Dorado County

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