

**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS RESPONSE TO
GRAND JURY REPORT NO. 0707:
THE WEST COUNTY FIRE PROTECTION MONTAGE REPORT
BY THE 2006-2007 CONTRA COSTA GRAND JURY**

FINDINGS

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.

Response: Agree.

2. The nine-member elected Richmond City Council is the governing body of the Richmond Fire Department.

Response: Required from the Richmond City Council.

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.

Response: Required from the Kensington Fire Protection District Board of Directors, El Cerrito City Council, Pinole City Council, Rodeo-Hercules Fire Protection District Board of Directors and Crockett-Carquinez Fire District Board of Directors.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

6. In all West County departments, an engine company is made up of a captain, an engineer, and a firefighter.

Response: Agree.

7. Excluding non-emergency calls, approximately 90% of calls to West County departments are for medical emergencies rather than fires.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree with regard to American Medical Response responding to Richmond calls. Response for the remainder of the finding required from the Richmond City Council.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

13. Richmond personnel and equipment respond to fire and emergency calls in CCCFPD’s jurisdiction twice as often as CCCFPD responds into Richmond.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Partially agree. Richmond and El Cerrito Fire dispatches three engines and a truck to fire alarms. The other agencies dispatch a single engine to a residential fire alarm sounding and two engines to a commercial structure fire alarm.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Required from the Richmond City Council.

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.

Response: Agree.

22. Each West County fire department is dependent on its governing body for funding, and therefore funding varies among the agencies.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree. In addition, the presence of Casino San Pablo has increased the number of calls. In 2004, CCCFPD responded to 28 emergency calls at the Casino. As the Casino expanded, the number of required responses increased, with 101 responses in 2006.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree.

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.

Response: Agree

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.

Response: Agree

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. That agreements to respond across agency boundaries be put in writing.

Response: Has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented by November 22, 2007.

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.

Response: Required from the Richmond City Council.

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.

Response: Has been implemented. Contra Costa County Fire District is an original member of the task force working to develop a regional communications system and the County Board of Supervisors has already signed a letter of intent to participate in the project.

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.

Response: Has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented at the appropriate time when the system costs are identified for each agency.

5. That Richmond complete its study of the AVL system, and join the AVL system within six months of this report.

Response: Required from the Richmond City Council.

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.

Response: Has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented as soon as possible. A temporary agreement is currently in effect between Contra Costa County Fire District and Richmond Fire.

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.

Response: Requires further analysis. The mutual/automatic aid system is designed to provide assistance to other agencies without compensation. The system has worked successfully for decades, and has leveraged the resources of fire districts to the benefit of all. The current one year agreement with the City of Richmond is an anomaly. If a contractual relationship is necessary to assure automatic aid response upon expiration of the contract with the City of Richmond, then the Fire District will conduct an analysis to identify available options.

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.

Response: Requires further analysis. The Fire District will invite the City of San Pablo to join with them in assessing the fire protection and medical emergency response needs of the city of San Pablo, including Casino San Pablo. Within six months, the Fire District will produce a plan on how to meet those needs, including capital improvement, staffing and financing options.

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.

Response: Has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in accordance to the Grand Jury recommended time frame. The Fire District will invite the City of San Pablo to join with them in assessing options for constructing and financing a new fire station in San Pablo. The District will formulate its recommended plan within six months.