



STAFF REPORT

~REVISED~

TO: Chair and Board Members **MEETING DATE:** September 17, 2021
FROM: Stephen C. Lieberman, Fire Chief
SUBJECT: Station Coverage Constraints Related to Memorandum of Agreement and Temporary Staffing Options

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended the Board receive the staff report and provide direction to the Fire Chief.

BACKGROUND

Prior to the formation of the Five Cities Fire Authority (FCFA), all three member communities had initiated the transition from volunteer-based organizations to full-time/career staffing. The Firefighter position remained a part-time/Reserve Firefighter position. FCFA, along with numerous other fire departments in San Luis Obispo County were significantly impacted with recruitment, retention and accountability/scheduling challenges related to this part-time position, including an increased opportunity for full-time career positions and limited compensation with little to no benefits. As an example of the compensation challenge, the top step for a FCFA Reserve Firefighter is \$17.00/hour. In-n-Out Burger in Arroyo Grande currently has a sign on the front door offering this amount as a starting wage with an opportunity to earn \$20.50/hour. These part-time employees have all worked additional jobs which has limited their ability to work at the FCFA. With regards to opportunity for full-time employment, these local agencies are currently recruiting for full-time Firefighter positions:

<u>City</u>	<u># Positions</u>
Paso Robles	3
San Luis Obispo	9
Santa Maria	8-10

The member communities supported a prioritization of the FCFA Strategic Plan and began the transition to full-time Firefighter positions in July 2018. A staff report from November 18, 2017 is attached for reference as this document provided the platform for the prioritization. This transitional process resulted in the recruitment of six career firefighters. The Oceano Community Services District (OCSD) was unable to increase their contribution to support the hiring of the three remaining full-time positions, which led to the effort of Oceano Measure A-20, and the related amendments to a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the three member communities. The current MOA calls for the OCSD to bring a revenue measure back to their

community in 2022, and the MOA also fixed member community financial contributions for fire and emergency services at fiscal year 2019-2020 levels. The failure of Measure A-20, along with the fixed financial contribution rate has placed operational challenges on the organization as operating expenses, a global pandemic, and increasing calls for service have strained the budget.

The FCFA Joint Powers Authority (JPA) agreement does not define specific station/staffing levels as related to operations. The only mention of staffing levels is included within the definition of the funding formula (Original Agreement - Exhibit B 3 / Third Amendment - #3 B).

Original JPA Funding Formula

The original formula included four components including community population (25%), current staffing (25%), service levels (25%), and assessed valuation (25%).

“Twenty-five percent (25%) of costs shall be fixed and shall be based on the following formula:

Community	Stations	Percentage	Staffing	Percentage	Total
Arroyo Grande	1	33%	6	40%	37%
Grover Beach	1	33%	6	40%	37%
Oceano	1	33%	3	20%	27%

The fixed base is assessed according to each Jurisdiction’s proportional share of the Authority’s full membership total of Full Time Equivalent Personnel and fire stations existing as of the effective date of the Joint Powers Agreement as noted above.”

Current (3rd) Amendment to the JPA Funding Formula

The third amendment to the JPA agreement (#3 Funding Formula, B) eliminated the assessed valuation component from the original formula. The revised formula is based on population (33%), current staffing levels (33%), and service levels (33%):

“The funding contributions specified in Section 2 were determined using a transitional formula that modified component 3 of the Funding Formula related to fire stations to reflect current staffing levels. The funding contributions specified in Section 2 will be used for Fiscal Years 2020/21 and 2021/22 and possibly Fiscal Year 2022/23 as provided in Section 4B.”

The intent of this transitional formula related to staffing was to eventually “equalize” the allocation percentages as shown above by eliminating the “staffing” component as staffing levels were hoped to be equal among the three member communities at the conclusion of the MOA process.

Based on this transitional formula, the staffing cost allocation in the fiscal year 2021-22 budget is:

Arroyo Grande	\$710,924	37.5%
Grover Beach	\$710,924	37.5%
Oceano	\$473,949	25.0%

Service Calls

Call volume increased 10% in 2020. Listed below is a summary of calls for service by community. The "Aid" column represents both local and out of county aid provided by FCFA.

Five Cities Fire Authority Incident Data												
Based on Station and Community												
Yr.	FCFA		AG	Change	Total Incidents				Aid		Total Call Volume	
	FCFA	Change			GB	Change	OCE	Change	Aid	Change	Total Call Volume	Change
2018	3520		1824		1098		566		164		3684	
2019	3439	-2.3%	1814	-0.5%	1049	-4.5%	543	-4.1%	166	1.2%	3605	-2.1%
2020	3778	9.9%	1962	8.2%	1075	2.5%	677	24.7%	204	22.9%	3982	10.5%
% of Incidents per Community												
Yr.	AG	GB	OCE									
2018	51.8%	31.2%	16.1%									
2019	52.7%	30.5%	15.8%									
2020	51.9%	28.5%	17.9%									

STATION CLOSURES AND STAFFING

The Reserve Firefighter program is based out of the Oceano fire station (Station 3). With the challenges described above, the lack of available part-time staff has resulted in temporary closures over the past several years. With the latest employee promotion, the station is currently closed two out of three shifts. While FCFA units continue to respond to Oceano, the closure of the station is less than optimal. A fire station is a key landmark within a community. With the advent of vehicle location technology (GPS), the geographical location of a fire station does not necessarily mean that the fire station location will always provide the fastest response of emergency resources. FCFA units are dispatched based where the closest resource to the call for service is located. A station closure could result in increased response times, and of course Oceano (or Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach) residents would prefer that their fire station remain open. FCFA staff has evaluated the current situation, and has identified several options for Board consideration:

Reinstatement of the Reserve Firefighter Program – The FCFA could perform a recruitment to fill two part-time positions. The challenges to this program have been clearly identified and acknowledged by current and prior FCFA Boards. Unlike full-time staff (represented positions), part-time employees cannot be mandated or force hired to work a shift. A part-time employee who failed to report to work would be subject to progressive discipline potentially leading to termination, but this fact does not resolve the fact that a shift could go unfilled. Maintaining a part-time work

force in an emergency response organization does not guarantee a consistent staffing or service level to the communities. As an example, the current part-time employee has scheduled time off for several shifts. If this was a represented position, the employee's shifts would be covered by other's to maintain negotiated minimum staffing levels (mandate/force-hire).

With the recent promotion of a former Reserve Firefighter to a full-time position, the existing Reserve Firefighter Program is down to one employee. The funding for this program is based on three employees which would cover all three shifts. Due to the recruitment and retention challenges of a part-time firefighter position, these two positions have remained vacant. The approximate cost to hire and equip a part-time or full-time employee is over \$12,000. While the FCFA requires candidates to have graduated from a state approved fire academy, successful recruits are also required to complete an in-house training program to learn FCFA-specific operational procedures, along with focused medical training as the FCFA provides "Expanded Scope" emergency medical services. The majority of the cost of this in-house training is related to overtime expenses for off-duty personnel to provide focused and condensed training. As shared with the Board in 2017, maintaining the Reserve program is not recommended.

Dissolution of Reserve Firefighter Program and Recruitment of One Full-Time/Career Firefighter – There exists funding to eliminate the part-time program and hire one full-time employee. While less than optimal (shift schedules require three employees) to cover a position 24/7/365, this represented position would always be filled (via force-hire or mandate), providing a more consistent staffing and service level.

The Fire Chief has met with the FCFA Treasurer and reviewed the existing Reserve Firefighter program budget. The annual \$147,500 could also offset the cost of a single full-time firefighter, while allowing funding for a part-time communications officer.

The operational impact to this option would be that the station Captain would have to also be the driver/operator of the engine. This would impact the Captain's ability to communicate on the radio and to maintain the responsibilities associated with being the incident commander.

Maintain the Existing Reserve Firefighter Position and Recruit One Full Time/Career Fire Engineer – The Board could direct the Fire Chief to maintain the current part-time position and to hire a full-time Fire Engineer. This option would more consistently keep the Oceano fire station open two out of three shifts. The identified challenges with the part-time program would continue (i.e. availability to work shifts, competition with outside employment) to exist. The addition of a Fire Engineer to this station would provide a dedicated driver/operator to assist the station Captain.

The FCFA Treasurer has determined that that by reducing the Reserve Firefighter program line item, with an offsetting increase to the Full Time Salaries line item, will result in a net increase to the budget of \$20,800. While the constraints of the existing MOA have resulted in increasing reliance on fund balance to support operations, "new" revenues from the current fire season would more than offset this increased cost.

“Down-Staffing” another Fire Station – The Arroyo Grande and Grover Beach fire stations are staffed by three personnel, while the Oceano station is typically staffed with two. This is related to the formation of the FCFA and Oceano providing less full-time positions than the other member agencies. The Arroyo Grande or Grover Beach station staffing could be reduced to two personnel, allowing the Oceano station to be open with two personnel. This would create an increased safety issue for crews, and a further decrease in the level of service provided the communities (reference 2017 staff report). Additionally, the second amendment to the JPA dated June 7, 2010 states, “...Continued transition to Career Firefighter position with hiring of three (3) full-time positions to be assigned to the Grover Beach station.” Down-staffing the Grover Beach station would conflict with the intent of the second amendment.

“Up-Staffing” with Off-Duty Personnel – The Fire Chief could hire full-time personnel who are off-duty to prevent a station closure. This option would require the expenditure of overtime funds that are not included in the budget. Listed below are some rough cost estimates:

Fire Captain at Station	Scheduled	
Overtime Engineer or Firefighter	\$2,000	2x this amount for both positions
Two Shifts/Week	\$4,000	
10 Shifts/Month (20 total)	\$40,000	
Annual Estimated Cost	\$480,000 / \$960,000	

This alternative would impact the ability for full-time employees to use their days off to rest and spend needed time with family. This “special assignment” would not be subject to mandate and force hire, meaning there is no requirement for off-duty personnel to accept the assignment. Additionally, the use of overtime employees who do not consistently work together as a crew impacts crew cohesion and coordination.

Closing a Fire Station and Utilizing a Task Force Response – If one of the fire stations were to be closed, another station could be staffed with four personnel. This would allow a “Task Force” response model which is used in Pismo Beach and Los Osos. Utilizing this concept, two FCFA apparatus would respond to an emergency call for service. If another emergency call was received (a 3rd call for service), and was considered high priority (i.e. cardiac arrest), the task force would split to allow a rapid response to the 3rd call, with the remaining task force members joining them as soon as they were available. While not optimal, this is an operational strategy that could be used during station closures. FCFA is currently using this model as a pilot study on days when the Oceano station is closed.

Rotating Station Closures – The need to close a station due to inadequate staffing could be rotated among the three member communities. While possible, there are logistical challenges to a “rotating brown-out” including:

- **Dispatch of Resources** – there could be disruption in the efficient dispatch of call with a constant change in equipment assignment/location.
- **Crew Quarters** – assuming the implementation of a task force response, the Oceano station modular could not accommodate four crew members and the Grover Beach station would require some minor remodeling work.
- **Location of Ladder Truck** – Due to the vehicle’s length, the ladder truck cannot be parked inside the Grover Beach or Oceano fire stations. The exterior equipment cabinets of fire engines do not lock, creating a security concern.

CONCLUSION

There exists no “obvious” solution to the staffing shortfalls and station impacts given the constraints of the Memorandum of Agreement and competitive job market. Staff would recommend continuing a task-force response structure as needed, and the recruitment of one full-time Fire Engineer. The recent promotions within the department generated an eligibility list for Fire Engineer candidates, and a full-time Firefighter position would be filled “behind” the promoted Fire Engineer. This will increase the partial staffing of the Oceano station (2 out of three shifts per week/ 4 days), and a task force response one shift per week. This will better equip the organization to maintain current emergency response capabilities until the June 2022 Oceano election. A “side letter” with IAFF Local 4403 would be required to amend the current Memorandum of Understanding to increase the Minimum Daily Staffing Levels to reflect the additional Fire Engineer position.

FISCAL IMPACT

The staff recommendation to maintain the current Reserve Firefighter position, the part time communications officer, and to hire one full-time Fire Engineer would increase the budget by \$20,800 annually. The \$20,800 would be added to the budget by reducing fund balance.

ALTERNATIVES

The following alternatives are provided for the Board’s consideration:

1. Direct the Fire Chief to maintain the existing Reserve Firefighter position, to add a full-time Fire Engineer position to be assigned to the Oceano fire station, and to supplement Oceano fire station staffing with a Task-Force response model as needed.
2. Direct the Fire Chief to implement a different alternative.
3. Provide other direction to staff.

ATTACHMENT:

Staff Report “Reserve Firefighter Program” November 18, 2017