

SMOKE BUT NO FIRE TULARE COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

BACKGROUND:

Prior to 2007, county fire protection was provided by CALFire via contract with the County. However, due to CALFire's proposed increase in firehouse staffing as well as significant State negotiated salary increases, the County chose to discontinue a partnership with CALFire and instead establish a county fire department to better control costs and services. The Tulare County Fire Department has been operational for ten years and has received an annual budget through the County budget process which is approved by the Board of Supervisors.

REASON FOR INVESTIGATION:

The Tulare County Grand Jury received a citizen's complaint on October 17, 2015. The complaint alleged unwarranted increased operational costs for fire protection as well as ineffective management of the Tulare County Fire Department, resulting in low volunteer morale and decreased volunteerism.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION:

The complainant and Tulare County Fire Department staff members were interviewed. Pertinent contracts and documents were reviewed. The Grand Jury conducted a ten-year operational and fiscal analysis. A comparison of available Extra Help Firefighters by fiscal year was reviewed.

FACTS:

1. Operational costs for the Tulare County Fire Department have increased an average of 3.25% per year over the last ten years.
2. In the nine (9) year period reviewed (2007 through 2015), the number of Extra Help (volunteer) enrolled ranged from high of 425 to the current low of 328.
3. Overall, the number of active Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters making themselves available to the Tulare County Fire Department has decreased.
4. Overall, the number of Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters responding to emergency calls has decreased.

5. Training requirements for new Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters has increased from 84 hours in 2004 to 140 hours in 2015. This is due to new regulations and developmental training.
6. Specific management decisions identified by the complainant were investigated by the Grand Jury.
7. It was reported to the Grand Jury that the Insurance Service Office (ISO) upgraded Tulare County Fire Department from an overall rating of 8/8Y to 4/4Y in its most recent fire department ratings.

FINDINGS:

- F1. A ten year increase of approximately 3.25% annually in operational costs is well within reasonable expectation.
- F2. Increased training requirements for current Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters have served to discourage volunteerism.
- F3. The Tulare County Fire Department has demonstrated concern for the decrease in volunteerism by implementing a pilot program to increase regular staffing at specific stations.
- F4. The decrease in the number of Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters responding to incidents has not had an appreciable effect on services rendered.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- R1. Aggressive efforts be implemented and monitored to recruit Extra Help (volunteer) Firefighters.
- R2. Continue and increase efforts with respect to staffing the fire stations.

REQUIRED RESPONSES:

1. Tulare County Fire Chief
2. Tulare County Board of Supervisors



County of Tulare

July 19, 2016

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2800 West Burrel
Visalia, CA 93291

TEL: (559) 636-5000
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The Honorable Bret Hillman
Presiding Judge
Tulare County Superior Court
County Civic Center, Room 303
221 South Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93291

RE: Grand Jury Report: "Smoke But No Fire Tulare County Fire Department"

Dear Judge Hillman:

On behalf of the Board of Supervisors, the following are the Board's responses to the findings and recommendations included in the 2015/2016 Tulare County Grand Jury Report titled "*Smoke But No Fire Tulare County Fire Department*". The Board of Supervisors has consulted with the Tulare County Fire Department to assist with these responses.

Findings and Board Responses

Finding 1

A ten year increase of approximately 3.25% annually in operational costs is well within reasonable expectation.

Response: The Board agrees with this finding.

Finding 2

Increased training requirements for current Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters have served to discourage volunteerism.

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Response: The Board partially agrees with this finding. The Fire Department has worked diligently to pursue potential applicants for Extra Help positions. Unfortunately, the need for full time employment is sometimes greater than volunteer positions. As stated by the Fire Department, increased state mandates can lead to increased expenditures in training and a decrease in participation.

Finding 3

The Tulare County Fire Department has demonstrated concern for the decrease in volunteerism by implementing a pilot program to increase regular staffing at specific stations.

Response: The Board agrees with this finding. Public safety is a major component of the services rendered by the Fire Department. Their new 2-0 staffing model is aimed at enhancing services in all Tulare County communities.

Finding 4

The decrease in the number of Extra Help (volunteer) firefighters responding to incidents has not had an appreciable effect on services rendered.

Response: The Board agrees with this finding. The Fire Department is efficient in ensuring that service/emergency calls from local resident do not go unanswered. Full time personnel act as first responders with the assistance of some Extra Help staff.

Recommendations and Board Responses

Recommendation 1

Aggressive efforts be implemented and monitored to recruit Extra Help (volunteer) Firefighters.

Response: This recommendation requires further analysis. The Board will support the Fire Department in implementing new strategies that may assist the department in obtaining new volunteer recruits. The department has already made improvements by increasing visibility and outreach to local communities by serving as faculty at Porterville College and College of the Sequoias. This allows them to educate the public on the importance of Fire/Public Safety and how volunteering can make a difference in one community.

Recommendation 2

Continue and increase efforts with respect to staffing the fire stations.

Response: The Board of Supervisors will support the Fire Department with resources that may be available to make sure that staffing does not interfere with services to the public. The Fire Department will continue to evaluate staff and service needs and report to the Board should they

require additional funding for future staffing needs. At that point, the Board, Fire Department, and County Administrative Office would work together to evaluate the financial feasibility of the potential request.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mike Ennis". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Mike" and last name "Ennis" clearly distinguishable.

Michael Ennis, Chairman
Tulare County Board of Supervisors

cc: Tulare County Grand Jury
5963 South Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93277



TULARE COUNTY FIRE DEPARTMENT

907 West Visalia Road, Farmersville, CA 93223 - Phone (559) 622-7600 - Fax (559) 747-8242

Charlie Norman
FIRE CHIEF

June 6, 2016

Tulare County Grand Jury
5963 South Mooney Boulevard
Visalia, CA 93277

The Honorable Judge Bret Hillman
County Civic Center, Room 303
Visalia, CA 93291

Tulare County Board of Supervisors
2800 W. Burrel Avenue
Visalia, CA 93291

To the Honorable Judge Bret Hillman, Tulare County Grand Jury Members, and the Tulare County Board of Supervisors,

First, I would like to thank the members of the Grand Jury for choosing to investigate the operations of the Tulare County Fire Department for your 2015/16 report. The service that our Department provides to the citizens of Tulare County is a critical component of public safety, and I am proud of the quality emergency services that we provide.

The following is my response to the findings and recommendations made in the 2015/16 report, pursuant to Penal Code sections 933c and 933.05:

Findings and Responses:

Finding 1:

A ten-year increase of approximately 3.25% annually in operational costs is well within reasonable expectation.

Response:

Agreed.

Finding 2:

Increased training requirements for current Extra-Help (Volunteer) Firefighters have served to discourage volunteerism.

Response:

Disagreed in part. Nationwide, volunteerism has decreased significantly in many disciplines. Increased state and federal mandates increase training requirements and training

expenditures. Many Extra-Help Firefighters enter the industry and realize that the time and training commitments are exhaustive in conjunction with full-time employment and other responsibilities. This lends to an extremely high attrition rate of the Extra-Help Firefighter Ranks.

Finding 3:

The Tulare County Fire Department has demonstrated concern for the decrease in volunteerism by implementing a pilot program to increase regular staffing at specific stations.

Response:

Agreed. In April, the Department has implemented the first 2-0 staffed fire station. The staffing includes 1 Captain/Lieutenant and 1 Fire Apparatus Engineer. Based on response data, the initial assignment was made at the Terra Bella Fire Station. The 2-0 staffing model will greatly enhance our service delivery model with additional fire suppression and emergency medical capabilities.

Finding 4:

The decrease in the number of Extra Help (Volunteer) Firefighters responding to incidents has not had an appreciable effect on services rendered.

Response:

Agreed. The majority of our responses come from newer personnel and a small group of long term Extra-Help employees who respond to all calls.

Recommendations and Responses:

Recommendation 1:

Aggressive efforts be implemented and monitored to recruit Extra-Help (Volunteer) Firefighters.

Response:

This recommendation has not been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

The past practice of the Department has been to hold 2-3 EH Academies over the course of a year based on interest. The Fire Department Training Division has recently completed the scheduled EH Recruit Academy in April of this year. At this time, we have 22 new EH Firefighters assigned to the various stations throughout the County. The Department will be starting an additional EH Academy in September, and we currently have over 18 candidates enrolled in the training. This will bring the total of EH Firefighters and Engineers to 256 (as of today's date) upon completion of the Academy.

In order to improve in this area, the Department is increasing its participation in serving as Adjunct Faculty in the Porterville College and College of Sequoias Fire Science Programs and basic fire academies. This visibility and outreach will help us with our annual, ongoing area recruiting efforts. In addition, the Department is also in the process of increasing its activity level in the local Community College and High School career day activities. This increased marketing and recruitment will assist in building the EH Firefighter ranks in the future.

Recommendation 2:

Continue and increase efforts with respect to staffing the fire stations.


Response:

This recommendation has not been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

The Fire Department will evaluate the next phase of coverage from a strategic perspective and standards of coverage model that best serve the citizens given the geographic area, mutual aid contracts, response data, and demands for service in each area. This increased staffing will be implemented as funding permits.

Again, thank you very much for your interest in and examination of the Tulare County Fire Department.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Charlie Norman', with a stylized, cursive script.

Charlie Norman, Fire Chief
Tulare County Fire Department

c: Michael Spata, County Administrative Officer