

## **GEORGETOWN FIRE DISTRICT**



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El Dorado County Grand Jury  
P.O. Box 472  
Placerville, CA 95667-0472

### Response to El Dorado County Grand Jury Recommendations

We have read the El Dorado County Grand Jury report on consolidation of Fire Protection Districts. While we would have preferred participating in the discussions and evaluations that led to the recommendations, we offer the following comments.

We at the Georgetown Fire Protection District believe that the residents in our community place a high value on the fire protection and emergency response services provided by our District. They see these services as a highly visible and direct return on the property taxes and assessments they pay each year when the County sends out the tax bills. We believe that, if asked their opinion, our constituents would say the last place to make budget cuts would be in fire and police services. If we were to suggest that the County were to spend \$14 to \$19 million less on fire safety in the next ten years without offering any evidence that the level of service would not be degraded, we do not think the citizens in our area would view that suggestion favorably.

While we agree that all of us should endeavor to provide fire protection and emergency services as efficiently and as cost-effectively as possible, recommendations like those contained in the Grand Jury report should be made only when supported by an extensive analysis of the operational, fiscal and political aspects of their implementation. In our opinion, the report does not convey to us that the analysis has been completed, rather that only a superficial review of some selected fiscal aspects was considered. For example in the operational area:

The report states that "El Dorado County has a disproportionately high number of fire protection districts compared with the average of other counties in California." In evaluating the number of districts, one needs to consider that the county covers a large

**"Neighbors helping Neighbors - Since 1854"**



geographic, and more importantly a geographically diverse, area. This geographical diversity results in increasing the number of fire risks. In El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park, reasonably compact suburban areas, the risks are mainly confined to fires starting within a structure. Fighting these fires requires specialized equipment and expertise possessed by city and suburban fire departments. In Georgetown we are surrounded by forested lands and have population thinly scattered throughout the District. While we must combat similar structure fires as in more developed areas, our primary risk is from the exterior threats as a result of brush and forest fires. We must maintain the equipment and provide special training to accomplish that task. While we endorse centralized dispatch to coordinate and enhance resource sharing, we believe the key to success is to put the right equipment and personnel on scene as quickly as possible under supervision of those experienced in command and control. So, we do not see much that can be changed in the placement of stations and equipment or in the training or supervisory requirement as a result of consolidation. To the extent that combining with more urban districts dilutes or deemphasizes the unique forest/residential population interface aspect of the fire protection we provide, it would place the residents of our area at greater risk.

In the financial area, the report focuses on the 'subsidies' that the County provides to six fire protection districts and raises a fairness issue for taxpayers outside those districts. In Georgetown we receive one of the smaller annual supplemental payments. However, we do not consider the return of property tax revenue to a district providing fire protection to the properties within it a 'subsidy', but rather, an effective, proper and beneficial use of those revenues. We believe the residents in our district would support that view. In contrast, the report recommends possible merger into "the three financially stronger fire districts" without mentioning potential equity issues arising from the combination of special assessments and benefits assessments already in place.

In a rather cavalier statement, the report states that elimination of the 'subsidies' "would require these fire protection districts to either find other sources of revenue in a similar amount, or find equivalent budget savings that would not degrade fire protection capability". In another section of the report, it states that "consolidation may also lead to more efficient service and lower administration costs, but these are difficult to quantitatively evaluate. Hence, they have not been included in this report." We can only conclude that given this lack of analysis, there is no foundation for recommending reductions of support for fire protection, forcing increases in the tax burden on residents in the affected districts or suggesting budget cuts that could be made magically without reducing service levels. In fact, we find it very peculiar that the Grand Jury would make such recommendations with only the most superficial analysis in the face of the recent history of devastating wildland interface fires and the potential of increasing risks due to drought conditions and increasing development in forested areas.

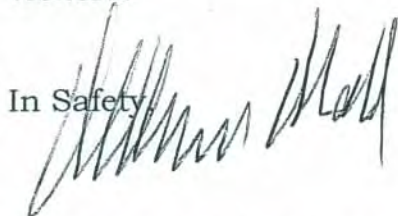
In the political arena, the citizens of El Dorado County are, for the most part indicated by voting trends, of a conservative nature believing that the best government is that closest to home. In Georgetown we have a strong sense of community. The fire department is an integral part of that sense. That commitment to ones' neighbors and community is a key reason we are able to attract and retain volunteer firefighters. This is the key reason we are able to provide the level of service we do within the limitations of our budget. With only five full-time paid staff, we have 36 volunteers who donate a large part of their time to



protecting the community. They have all undergone extensive training in the academy that we operate and must continually maintain and upgrade their skills to meet the increasing number of regulatory requirements placed upon us. They also contribute financial support through fund raising events and social activities. We do not believe we could continue to attract or retain the number of dedicated volunteers if governance of the organization were moved outside of the community. Loss of volunteer participation would most certainly result in decreases to current levels of protection and it is doubtful the County or any consolidated district would have the resources to replace volunteer participation.

In conclusion, while we do not reject the concept of targeted or functional consolidation (Indeed, we are always open to examining if consolidating with an adjacent district would be beneficial); we find the Grand Jury's recommendations to be superficial and lack the sound basis that would have been provided by detailed analysis. In a sense, we believe that they are reckless in that they propose significant cuts in funding at a time when we should be looking for ways to increase fire protection and emergency services in our County. The core mission of county government is to provide for public safety to all of its citizens and visitors.

In Safety

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "William Mahl", written over the words "In Safety".

WILLIAM MAHL, President of the Board of Directors  
Georgetown Fire Protection District

C: Greg Schwab, Fire Chief  
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