

SAN DIEGO REGIONAL FIRE SAFETY FORUM

A professional forum to educate the public about the threat of wildfires and what future changes are necessary to protect the San Diego Region

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*"Insanity: doing the same thing over and over again
and expecting different result."*

- Albert Einstein

SAN DIEGO FIRE PROTECTION: WHAT'S NEXT?

The San Diego Regional Fire Safety Forum was created to provide a professional, non-biased viewpoint regarding the fire safety needs of San Diego County. Our work is performed as a voluntary service to educate the citizens of the region in hopes of improving their safety on a day-to-day basis as well as during major catastrophes.

Five years after the 2003 Cedar Fire and one year after the 2007 wildfire siege, much remains to be done to improve fire protection services and, even worse, cuts in service levels now are being discussed due to revenue shortfalls to local governments. Since we know we don't have consensus yet with the voters and stakeholders, we recommend trying a more detailed approach in hopes that IF we are able to craft a solid implementation plan we could then gain momentum and support from government and our citizens. Our Forum is proposing that a coalition of interested parties join together to initiate the retention of a competent professional consulting firm that will outline a vision for improvement, identify a fiscal impact, educate the public and elected officials as to its findings, and propose a plan for implementation. The details of such a process are attached.

WHY DID PROPOSITION A FAIL?

While there are many reasons for the recent failure of the parcel tax proposition, some are as follows:

- It was a non-inclusive process in which many stakeholders were not involved
- There was no defined plan or measurements for effectiveness
- There was no independent fire professional analysis performed of the region's shortfalls
- There was no educational component for the citizens or local government officials
- It was a political approach as opposed to a professional one
- It proposed an unfair tax methodology
- Not even two-thirds of the area fire chiefs supported the plan, so why would the electorate?

Regardless of why it failed, the question before us is what do we do next? Our proposal is outlined in the “Go-Forward Strategy.”

GO-FORWARD STRATEGY

In light of the failure of Proposition A and in response to the findings of the San Diego County Grand Jury, the SDRFSF recommends that the County of San Diego direct its Chief Administrative Officer to prepare a Request for Qualifications (not Request For Proposal) process designed to retain an experienced fire master planning and local government fiscal planning firm that would develop a *feasible, phased* approach to resolving the County’s regional fire problem. All cities, the County, and selected stakeholders should be involved in drafting the scope, and expenses should be phased in on an incremental basis as study results are delivered.

A proposed sample of this regional coalition could consist of members of the following groups:

1. County government, elected and professional
2. City governments, elected and professional
3. Fire District Boards
4. San Diego County Fire Chiefs Association
5. San Diego County Fire Districts Association
6. San Diego County Taxpayers Association
7. San Diego County Regional Chamber of Commerce
8. San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG)
9. San Diego Regional Economic Development Corporation
10. San Diego County Council of Firefighters
11. Area Colleges and Universities
12. Fire and Science Conservation Communities
13. League of Women Voters
14. Knowledgeable Interested Parties (to be named)

Minimally, this Fire Master Plan would:

1. Evaluate current staffing levels, and make recommendations for improvements using industry benchmarks.
2. Identify best practices in the area of utilizing citizen education/patrols (volunteers) to augment firefighting efforts countywide.
3. Set zones of fire and emergency medical services and desired service level outcomes to quantify staffing and station distribution:
 - i. Remote-Wilderness
 - ii. Rural
 - iii. Emerging suburban
 - iv. Suburban
 - v. Urban
 - a. From the desired response outcomes by zone, use prior fire merger studies to build upon what already exists and how best to merge the existing operations and revenue sources.
 - b. The implementation plan must be flexible and provide for:

- i. Existing levels of service without one area declining and another gaining at the declining area's expense.
 - ii. The ability to grow revenue if, by zone, there is public support for increased services.
 - iii. Criteria for impact fees and supplemental property tax rates for new construction (Mello Roos, etc.).
 - iv. A flexible approach that allows agencies to "join over time" as benefit is seen.
 - v. Joint governance by the appropriate elected officials.
4. Propose options for a regional governance structure.
5. Evaluate current administrative service levels and make recommendations for merging and improving the following using industry benchmarks:
 - fire prevention and vegetation management
 - station/apparatus maintenance
 - communications
 - training
 - personnel/legal services
 - fiscal services
6. Prepare a fiscal analysis for all categories, and include options for revenue generation to meet funding requirements. Review current governmental spending priorities, by major category, and present reasonable options in lieu of new taxes.
7. Require meetings with governmental entities to share the findings and prepare public education strategies.

If new funding is required to implement final recommendations, a ballot measure should be prepared for the 2010 general election. That should allow ample time for a thorough public vetting of the issues, and a well-planned and implemented public education effort.

SUMMARY

The people of San Diego are concerned for their safety—we owe it to them to be accountable about our current situation, identify what needs to be improved, determine what it will cost, and describe how they will benefit from the changes. Only when they are fully educated will they be prepared to make the tough decisions necessary to implement the appropriate solutions.