

A CROSSROADS AT COMPTCHE
A Report on the Comptche Volunteer Fire Department
April 6, 2006

Summary

The 2005/2006 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of the Comptche Volunteer Fire Department. While the Department faces many challenges in the future, none of these are insurmountable.

Background

The 2004/2005 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of seven rural fire districts within Mendocino County. The 2005/2006 Grand Jury continued this work by reviewing an additional four districts, including Comptche Volunteer Fire Department, a nonprofit, which provides fire protection services by contract to Comptche Community Services District.

Methods

The Grand Jury conducted site visits and interviewed Department and district personnel as well as state and County officials. The Grand Jury also reviewed relevant documents such as their budget and personnel roster.

Findings

1. The Comptche Volunteer Fire Department (CVFD) enjoys a high level of community support.
2. The total 2005/2006 budget for the CVFD is \$66,681.
3. \$28,185 of the 2005/2006 budget is in the form of specific purpose grants.
4. The CVFD maintains no operating reserves.
5. The Comptche Community Services District tax base covers 100 square miles.
6. The chief receives no compensation.
7. On average the chief spends 10 hours per week on fire department business, which includes recruiting volunteers, writing grant proposals, developing the budget, monitoring expenditures, attending county level fire protection meetings and numerous administrative tasks.
8. The CVFD has a roster of 21 personnel, which includes one chief, one training officer, one medical officer, six firefighters, and 12 additional personnel.
9. All available personnel respond to fire calls.
10. Responders receive no compensation.
11. The CVFD has an ongoing training program.
12. The CVFD has an active fleet of seven vehicles.
13. Twenty-eight percent of the active fleet was obtained through the Federal Excess Personal Property (FEPP) program.
14. The CVFD does not have a long range plan for replacing equipment.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that the CVFD:

1. work to maintain and promote the current level of community support. (Findings 1, 8-10)
2. make the office of chief a paid position. (Findings 5-7)
3. develop a long term plan for replacing equipment. (Findings 12-14)
4. establish operating reserves. (Findings 2-4)

Comments

The CVFD provides a vital service to both the Comptche area and the County as a whole. In a mutually beneficial relationship, employers in Comptche provide a pool for volunteer firefighters and thereby promote public safety for themselves and the entire community. It is in the best interests of the County to support the CVFD as well as local employers.

The CVFD is staffed entirely by volunteers who cover out of their own pockets expenses incurred while on a call. In addition to the monetary costs associated with volunteering to serve in the CVFD, the chief also has the burden of responsibility for any accidents or problems which occur in the Department. Making the office of chief a paid position will alleviate some of the pressure on him, allowing him to devote a portion of his time to behind-the-scenes department business like grant writing and community outreach efforts.

Some of the Department's equipment was obtained through the FEPP program, which provides a vital and much needed source of equipment for small rural fire departments. FEPP requires that unserviceable or excess equipment initially acquired through the program be disposed of only through a long and complicated process which involves considerable time and paperwork to complete. Due to already high workloads, this process is often low on the list of priorities for a department. Some of the currently active equipment is on the verge of becoming unserviceable and will need to be stored. The only solution to this dilemma is to proceed through the disposal process before storage becomes a serious problem for the Department. Further information on the FEPP program can be found at <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/partners/fepp/>.

The CVFD's high level of community support is demonstrated by the fact that appreciative local residents donated much of the work and materials needed to expand the station in Comptche.

Response Required

Board of Directors, Comptche Community Services District (Findings 1-14, Recommendations 1-4)

Chief, Comptche Fire Department (Findings 5-14, Recommendations 2-4)