

A LONG ROAD FOR LEGGETT

A REPORT ON THE LEGGETT VALLEY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT MARCH 16, 2006

Summary

The 2005-2006 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of the Leggett Valley Fire Protection District. The Grand Jury found that the district was burdened by the problems of limited funding and support.

Background

The 2004-2005 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of seven rural fire districts within the County. The 2005-2006 Grand Jury continued this work by reviewing an additional four districts, including Leggett Valley Fire Protection District.

Methods

The Grand Jury conducted site visits and interviewed department personnel as well as State and County officials. The Grand Jury also reviewed relevant documents such as the budget and the personnel roster.

Findings

1. The Leggett Valley Fire Protection District (LVFPD) tax base covers 53 square miles.
2. The LVFPD response area covers 155 square miles.
3. Sixty percent of district calls are medical responses.
4. Thirty percent of district calls are traffic-related.
5. The LVFPD has recently employed a collection agency to recover costs for responses outside district boundaries and calls involving nonresidents.
6. The LVFPD budget includes \$25,000 to pay matching funds on a \$189,000 FEMA grant used for purchasing a new fire truck yet to be delivered.
7. The total LVFPD 2005-2006 budget is \$52,300, which includes the \$25,000 matching funds.
8. The chief receives no compensation.
9. The chief spends many hours per week on fire department business, including arranging training schedules, arranging for equipment maintenance, recruiting volunteers, writing grant proposals, and monitoring expenditures.
10. The LVFPD has insufficient community support.
11. Most Leggett residents work outside the area.
12. Most of the older residents have already served in the fire department.
13. The LVFPD has a roster of nine volunteers, including the chief, assistant chief, two captains and five firefighters.
14. All available personnel respond to calls.
15. Responders receive no compensation.

16. The LVFPD has an ongoing training program.
17. The LVFPD has an active fleet of three vehicles; all are at least ten years old, the oldest vehicle is 30 years old.
18. The LVFPD does not have a long range plan for replacing equipment.
19. An ad hoc committee of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors has been directed to explore ways in which the County can assist rural fire districts.

Response (Board of Supervisors):

The Board agrees with these findings.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the LVFPD make the office of chief a paid position. (Findings 8, 9,11)
2. the LVFPD work to increase community support. (Findings 10-14, 16)
3. the LVFPD develop a long term plan for replacing equipment. (Findings 17, 18)
4. the LVFPD establish operating reserves. (Findings 6, 7,18)
5. the LVFPD monitor collection results for out-of-district responses. (Finding 5)
6. County government actively promote opportunities for economic development in the Leggett area. (Findings 1-4, 11, 12, 14, 19)

Response (Board of Supervisors): This recommendation has not yet been implemented. The Board will encourage, through its Interim CEO and Economic Development Coordinator, to begin the efforts in researching the Piercy area relative to economic development within the next twelve months.

Response (Interim Chief Executive Officer): The recommendation has not yet been implemented. The Interim CEO will encourage its Economic Development Coordinator to research the Piercy area for economic development opportunities within the next twelve months.

Comments

Lack of community support is the most critical issue facing the LVFPD. The Grand Jury found that while offers of support are received by the department, few of these result in real assistance.

Lack of economic opportunity in the north central portion of Mendocino County results in few people being able and/or willing to participate in the fire department. Most people work out of the area and so are unable to respond to calls during the day or to participate in the extensive training required of department personnel. The majority of older residents in the Leggett area have already served in the fire department and are unwilling or unable to do so again. This leaves primarily younger residents as the volunteer pool, most of whom do not have the time.

The chief is the operational head of 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 the behind-the-scenes department business like grant writing and community outreach efforts. It is very difficult to hold a fulltime job and carry out the duties of the chief.

County government also has a role to play. Only it can address the lack of economic opportunity in the Leggett area; only if people are able to live and work in the area can the fire department be viable in the long term.

Response Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Finding 19, Recommendation 6)

Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer (Recommendation 6)

Board of Directors, Leggett Valley Fire Protection District (Findings 1-18, Recommendations 1-5)

Chief, Leggett Valley Fire Protection District (Findings 1-18, Recommendations 2, 3, 5)