

THE PIERCY PHOENIX

A REPORT ON THE PIERCY FIRE PROTECTION DISTRICT

March 16, 2006

Summary

The 2005-2006 Mendocino County Grand Jury conducted an oversight of the Piercy Fire Protection District and found a district struggling with enormous burdens to rebuild itself.

Background

The 2004-2005 Mendocino Grand Jury conducted an oversight of seven rural fire districts within the County, including the Piercy Fire Protection District (PFPD). At the time of that oversight the PFPD was non-operational, having closed down in January 2004. The PFPD resumed operations in August of 2005.

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 PFPD receives less than \$9000 a year in property tax revenue.
2. The PFPD receives some income from donations and grants; this income is unpredictable.
3. The PFPD tax base covers 7.2 square miles.
4. The PFPD response area covers approximately 100 square miles.
5. Most district calls are related to traffic accidents on US 101.
6. The chief receives no compensation.
7. On average, the chief spends 15-20 hours per week on fire department business, including arranging training schedules, arranging for equipment maintenance, recruiting volunteers, writing grant proposals, developing the budget, monitoring expenditures, and reporting to commissioners.
8. Most residents of the Piercy area commute into Humboldt County for employment.
9. The PFPD has a roster of nine volunteers, which include one chief, one assistant chief, one training officer, one safety officer and five first responders.
10. All available personnel respond to calls.
11. Responders receive no compensation.
12. The PFPD has a fleet of four vehicles; two are over 20 years old.
13. The PFPD does not have a long range plan for replacing equipment.
14. 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.

Recommendations

The Grand Jury recommends that:

1. the PFPD seek ways to recover costs for out-of-district calls and calls involving nonresidents. (Findings 1, 5, 11)
2. County government actively promote opportunities for economic development in the Piercy area. (Findings 1, 2, 8)

Comments

As the smallest fire protection district in the County and with no local employers, the PFPD finds itself in a truly hazardous position. In January of 2004 the department shut down operations, in part due to changes in state law. SB1207-Romero 2002 made department chiefs and directors responsible for ensuring that volunteers be trained to the same level as responders in full-time, paid departments. Unfortunately, many would-be volunteers are unable to spend the time and money required not only to reach this level of training but to maintain it. As a result, many fire departments in the County have had to face a drastic shortage of people willing and able to volunteer. The fact that the chief and board of directors are personally responsible for this training was part of the reason that the PFPD closed for more than 18 months. During this time the Leggett Valley Fire Protection District was responding to calls in this area. This resulted in a ripple effect through the rest of the County as other districts had to respond farther north and east to fill in the gap.

The revenue to PFPD comes primarily from property taxes. Under the terms of Proposition 13 all property tax is lumped together. This amount is then distributed to the various entities in the County which receive property tax revenue. The amount apportioned to each entity is determined by law. Special districts like PFPD receive a fixed percentage of all property tax revenues proportionate to district area. As a result, this level of support is fixed and offers no solution to the problems facing the district.

The fact that the PFPD is once again in operation should not be taken as evidence that these problems no longer exist. With yearly revenues of less than \$9000 (compared to Leggett Valley Fire Protection District with a comparable non-grant budget of \$21,300) the PFPD is constantly on the verge of shutting down once again. Should they experience an equipment failure in their aging fleet or a sudden loss of personnel, they may have no option but to close down. The Grand Jury recognizes there is little, if anything, the PFPD can do to alleviate this situation as it is largely the result of State and County policies. The Grand Jury looks to County government to work with the PFPD in seeking innovative ways to maintain public safety.

The Grand Jury would like to recognize the extraordinary efforts, both past and ongoing, made by the members of the PFPD and Piercy residents in general in restoring their department to operational status.

Response Required

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Recommendation 2)

Mendocino County Chief Executive Officer (Recommendation 2)

Board of Directors, Piercy Fire Protection District (Findings 1-13,
Recommendation 1)

Chief, Piercy Fire Protection District (Findings 1-13, Recommendation 1)