

Willits City Government, Little Lake Fire District, and Willits Unified School District

Overall the City of Willits (Willits) operates effectively, with some problems, through its Departments of City Administration, Public Works, and Police. The Little Lake Fire District provides superlative services. The Willits Unified School District provides good education in a relatively safe environment; maintenance at some schools needs attention.

City Administration

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury met with the Mayor, City Manager, and city personnel. The Grand Jury reviewed the Ten Year Plan, Policies and Procedures, budgets, complaint forms, Future Growth Plan, Willits 101 Bypass documents, and the Emergency Disaster Plan.

Background Information

Willits, known as the 'Heart of Mendocino County,' was incorporated in 1888. Willits operates under a city council-city manager form of government with a five-member City Council that elects the Mayor each year. The 'One-town, One-vision' program came about for citizen input about Willits development; it is not an official Willits program.

According to the 1990 census, Willits has 5,027 residents and 7,000 people live in the surrounding areas including Pine Mountain, Brooktrails, and Little Lake Valley.

Findings

1. Willits has sound fiscal practices with an annual budget of \$4.06 million, with a reserve of \$415,00 for emergencies. Willits also had a carry over of \$1.4 million from last fiscal year.
2. Willits follows solid plans for operating the city and follows its policies and procedures.
3. Appropriate departments handle all complaints quickly and efficiently.
4. Willits is following its Ten Year Plan for improvements throughout the city.
5. Willits is studying the possibilities for growth and new business.
6. California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and the City of Willits are still working on the Willits 101 Bypass; construction has not been started. The Willits administration has supported the bypass, but some local citizens continue to request more information from Caltrans,

stalling construction. The Caltrans Director signed the Draft Environmental Document for the Willits Bypass on May 13, 2002.

7. Willits has a strategic plan that emphasizes 'Business to Business' (business suppliers) and bringing cottage industries to the downtown area.
8. Willits administration is concerned that local media is not reporting the city's successful programs.

Public Works

Public Works Department (Public Works) performs its function well, however, there are a couple of problems that need attention.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury interviewed the Public Works Director and reviewed current job orders, complaint forms, and an organizational chart. The Grand Jury visited the public works yard and inspected the equipment.

Background Information

Public Works is charged with the maintenance of streets, landscaping, and city buildings. Public Works is also responsible for other city infrastructure such as the water and sewer systems.

Findings

9. The yard was clean and all equipment not in use was under cover.
10. Public works maintains equipment properly.
11. Public works does not have a common tracking system for all department data.
12. The Public works Director advised the Grand Jury that the department needs one more technician and a clerical worker.
13. During visits to the offices and shop areas, the Grand Jury saw no Cal-OSHA safety books or posters.

Police Department

The Willits Police Department (Police Department) infrastructure is in place, but the public perception of the Police Department is that there is a lack of communication between the public and the officers on the street.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury conducted a review of the Police Department and talked to the Police Department Chief and Captain and took a tour of the facilities. Grand Jurors accompanied on-duty police officers on three ride-alongs.

Background Information

The Highway 101 corridor is the major factor in police services required, from traffic to other crimes. The Police Department has 12 sworn personnel, three reserve officers, and 12 patrol vehicles.

Findings

14. While the Grand Jury observed officers, they conducted their activities professionally with restraint and consideration to those being stopped and talked to or given notice or citations.
15. The Grand Jury's attempted to interview citizens with a different perspective on the Police Department. Citizens refused to give details of their experiences with the Police Department because they said fear retaliation. Persons interviewed by the Grand Jury were reluctant to file formal complaints because of fear of retaliation.
16. There is no citizen review board. The Police Department does not support the concept of a citizen review board.
17. In September 2001, the Police Department reported staff shortage and high turnover; in May 2002, the Police Department reported that there is no staff shortage and turnover is minimal.
18. The Police Department increasingly must work with Spanish-speaking people. The one bilingual Spanish-speaking officer on the Police Department staff cannot provide all translation services required. WPS has access to translation by telephone, but the service is less than effective because it can only be used at the station and not in the field.
19. The Police Department is aware and concerned about drug activities in Willits, especially around school sites.
20. The County of Mendocino owns and is responsible for maintenance of the building the Police Department occupies. The building needs repairs. There is a leak through an unsightly gaping hole in the ceiling of the main Police Department conference room. The Police Department turns in complaints to the County Buildings and Grounds Department when it rains. The County comes out and does a quick patch, but no permanent repairs.

Little Lake Fire District

The Fire District is extremely well run.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury interviewed the Fire Chief and a Director of the Fire District. The Grand Jury reviewed budgets and policies and procedures. The Grand Jury toured the Fire District facilities and viewed all apparatus and equipment.

Background Information

The Fire District has five elected Directors, who volunteer their time. The Directors are responsible for the administration of the Fire District finances and funding.

The Fire District provides the following services:

- Disaster Preparedness and Response
- Fire Protection and Suppression
- Fire Safety Education
- Hazardous Materials Response and Mitigation Team
- Light and Heavy Rescue
- Auto Extrication
- High Angle and Cliff Rescue
- Swift Water Rescue
- Medical Response and Ambulance Assists
- Urban Search and Rescue
- Underwater diving team
- Public Assists (helping the elderly & others)

There are only five paid positions at the Fire District; they are as follows:

The **Fire Chief** is responsible to the Board of Directors and the Public. The Chief also serves as the City of Willits Fire Marshall and oversees matters that concern private and public safety. Included in his duties are the administration, budgeting, and operations of his department.

The **Secretary/Treasurer** holds both positions. The secretary/treasurer manages the operations of the administrative office and the department's daily functions as well as serving as secretary/treasurer to the Board of Directors.

Firefighter 1 is the maintenance supervisor for all facilities and equipment.

Firefighter 2, the training supervisor, provides 40 volunteers the best and most modern firefighting training available.

The Fire District serves approximately 380 square miles, including 57 miles of state highways. The District also protects approximately \$265 million in assessed property value.

Findings

21. The Fire Chief and Firefighters 1 and 2 have State and National Certification. Most volunteers are professionally certified in their rank; many hold State and National Certifications.

22. The Fire District operates with a \$450,000 budget. The Fire District provides strong services because of the volunteer force and private fund-raising.
23. The Grand Jury found the fire-fighting apparatus well maintained.
24. The Fire District is very astute in acquiring grants and new equipment.

Willits Unified School District

Willits Unified School District (School District) has undefined and uneven enforcement of dress codes and some school sites have maintenance problems.

Method of Investigation

The Grand Jury interviewed the School District Superintendent, school principals, and the Maintenance Supervisor. The Grand Jury toured school sites, including the Willits Charter School, and visited classes in session. The Grand Jury reviewed pertinent California Education Codes pertinent to school dress codes.

Background Information

The School District has an enrollment of 2,283 students and 153 paid staff.

The School District has a dress code based on California Education Codes §35183 and 35294.2. Note §35294.2.(a)(2)(F):

The provisions of any schoolwide dress code, pursuant to Section 35183, that prohibits pupils from wearing ‘gang-related apparel,’ if the school has adopted such a dress code. For those purposes, the comprehensive school safety plan shall define ‘gang-related apparel.’ The definition shall be limited to apparel that, if worn or displayed on a school campus, reasonably could be determined to threaten the health and safety of the school environment. Any schoolwide dress code established pursuant to this section and Section 35183 shall be enforced on the school campus and at any school- sponsored activity by the principal of the school or the person designated by the principal. For the purpose of this paragraph, ‘gang-related apparel’ shall not be considered a protected form of speech pursuant to Section 48950.

Findings

25. The School District and Willits High School emphasize prohibition of certain colors or certain clothing and items that are known to depict gang colors or symbols and distract from teaching goals. The school safety plan does not define ‘gang-related apparel’ as required by

Education Code §35294.2.(a)(2)(F). The Student Handbook does not specify prohibited colors or clothing items.

26. Willits High School ground maintenance is poor. Back parking areas need upgrading. Some lockers are broken. Agriculture areas, including gardens and farm animal pens, are unkempt.
27. The Willits High School dumpster area has no enclosure to hide the garbage and keep out animals.
28. Many school sites have paved areas and walkways with uneven surfaces and potholes that can cause tripping.
29. Baechtel Grove Middle School has a drainage problem on the west side of the school grounds, where older portable classrooms are located. Rain water puddles at ramps and runs under disabled students' classrooms. Children have to traverse standing water to get to class. The standing water under classrooms also causes dampness and mold inside the classrooms.

Recommendations

- A. The Public Works Department establish a system for tracking work orders. (Finding 11)
- B. Willits hire another technician and a clerical worker for the Public Works Department. (Finding 12)
- C. The Public Works Department distribute CAL-OSHA safety books and posters as required by applicable laws. (Finding 13)
- D. Willits City Council set a policy for Police Department behavior in dealing with the public and ensure that it is followed. (Finding 15, 16)
- E. Willits Police Department increase Spanish-speaking capacity of officers through training classes or recruitment. (Finding 18)
- F. County make changes to roof at Police/courthouse to correct leaks and repair damage inside building.(Finding 20)
- G. Willits Unified School District make the dress code explicit and enforce it evenly. (Finding 25)
- H. Willits School District develop a maintenance needs assessment for Willits High School, formulate a strategy, and clean up the mess. (Finding 26)
- I. The School District install an enclosure at Willits High School around the dumpster area to hide garbage and keep out animals. (Finding 27)
- J. The School District repair paved areas and walkways. (Finding 28)
- K. The School District divert standing water away from the older portable classrooms on the west end of Baechtel Grove School. (Finding 29)

Comments

Comment on Finding 6 in this report: according to Caltrans, “We conducted an extensive traffic volume and origin/destination survey in Willits in 1998. The annual average daily traffic was 25,700 in the Willits area. Of that traffic, the average daily truck traffic exceeds 1000 south of the intersection of US 101 and SR 20.

“Caltrans keeps only the most recent 10 years of traffic collision data on all State highways due to the huge data storage logistics. Data on the current years is not accumulated until the end of the year. To evaluate the need for improvement projects, we typically examine the last five years of traffic collision data.

“There were 469 collisions on US 101 between June 1995 and May 2000 in the Willits Bypass project area. Of the 469 collisions reported, three resulted in fatalities, 141 resulted in injuries, and the remainder resulted solely in property damage. The existing total collision rate, injury collision rate, and fatality collision rate are 4.5, 3.0 and 1.5 times higher than the statewide average total, injury and fatality collision rates, respectively, compared to a rural four-lane facility with the same average daily traffic.”

The Grand Jury urges the residents of Willits to visit and tour the facilities of the Fire District to see how extremely well this department functions.

The Grand Jury noted during tours of schools by the Superintendent and principals that they were very professional, prepared, and helpful.

The Grand Jury believes the students of Willits would be better served with a new, modern high school facility.

Response Required

Willits City Council (Recommendations A – E & related Findings)

Mendocino County Board of Supervisors (Recommendation F & related Finding)

Little Lake Fire District Board of Directors (Findings 22 – 25)

Willits Unified School District Board of Trustees (Recommendations G –K & related Findings)

Response Requested

Willits City Manager (Recommendations A–E & related Findings)

Willits Public Works Director (Recommendations A–C & related Findings)

Willits Police Chief (Recommendations D, E & related Findings)

Mendocino County General Services Director (Recommendation F & related Findings)

Little Lake Fire District Chief (Findings 22–25)

Willits Unified School District Superintendent (Recommendation G–K & related Findings)