

Sales tax measure addresses critical fire and rescue funding needs

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A proposed county-wide sales tax measure to prevent and respond to wildfires and other emergencies is on the March 2024 ballot.

Who answers the call when a fallen power line sparks a grass fire? Or when a windstorm topples tree branches across the road? Who comes to your home in the middle of the night in a medical emergency? Who is first on the scene in a traffic accident or is prepared to rope down a cliff to rescue a fallen hiker?

Here at The Sea Ranch, a combined force of trained volunteers and career CAL FIRE firefighters are the first responders whenever and wherever emergencies occur in our local region. A proposed half cent sales tax measure on the March 5, 2024, ballot is designed to ensure that these essential services will be adequately supported in the future. If passed, the tax measure will provide \$1.4 million dollars in additional funding each year to the North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District (NSCFPD), our local fire agency.

The NSCPD is responsible for providing fire protection, emergency medical response and rescue services to the communities of The Sea Ranch, Annapolis and Stewarts Point. The district encompasses 172 square miles of land, oversees and supports 14 North Sonoma Coast volunteer firefighters, and hires five full-time CAL FIRE firefighters through an annual contract with the State. But there is growing concern that the district may not have enough staff to handle all its responsibilities in the near future.

“We know we are understaffed, but we can’t afford to hire more people with our current budget,” says Fire Chief Bonnie Plakos. “Our current contract with CAL FIRE enables us to have two full-time firefighters on duty at any one time, 24/7. National Fire Protection Agency (NFPA) standards recommend a minimum crew of three for each shift, which for us would mean a minimum of nine full-

time career firefighters instead of the five we currently have. Future changes to CAL FIRE’s union contract could make that higher staffing level a requirement.”

“So, yes, we are concerned as we look down the road,” she continues, “particularly when we consider our volunteer responders, who we rely on to answer calls for medical emergencies, car accidents, downed power lines and so much more.” She notes that the average age of local volunteers is 59 and that younger recruits have been hard to find. “Sadly, our volunteers are aging out, and it’s clear that at some point we will need to increase staff to provide these essential services,” she says.

Balancing the district budget has become increasingly more difficult as the cost of CAL FIRE personnel and other essential expenses continue to rise each year, notes District Board Chair Marti Campbell. “Right now more than two-thirds of the \$1.8 million in funds we receive from property taxes goes to cover our annual contract with CAL FIRE, which pays for our firefighting crew, training of our volunteer force, and the maintenance of our fire and rescue vehicles,” she says.

“The rest of the funding we receive goes toward the purchase and maintenance of other fire apparatus, supplies and equipment, dispatch fees, the maintenance of the North Station, personal protective equipment, training, and other expenses such as financial, legal, personnel, insurance, and other administrative costs.”

The CAL FIRE crew and emergency vehicles are housed at the CAL FIRE Station on Annapolis Road. Funding from the tax measure will enable the NSCFPD to increase the number of these essential CAL FIRE personnel to the recommended minimum of three on duty at all times.

The tax measure will also enable the district to expand the North Fire Station on Highway One to

house more fire engines and to finish the interior so that volunteers or paid crew can be housed at the site and much-needed space can be provided for equipment, office work and training. The district also plans to hire paid staff to help manage the complex financial and administrative requirements of operating the district and to increase community education and coordination of safety and fire prevention projects. Administration is currently being handled by Fire Chief Plakos and other volunteers.



The North Station on Highway One.
Photo by Craig Tooley

Sonoma County fire chiefs see need for additional funding

The county-wide sales tax measure was initiated by the members of the Sonoma County Fire Chiefs Association because of their concern that current county systems and funding levels for fire services have not been sufficient to meet the challenges they face. Like many counties in California, fire service responders in Sonoma County have had to deal with critical funding needs as they adjust to the increased impact of wildfires and winter storms, which have now become an annual reality.

The primary goal of the tax measure is “to provide for more efficient, effective, and sustainable fire response, paramedic services, and wildfire prevention and response capabilities to protect the health and safety of Sonoma County residents, business owners, and visitors.” Funds generated by the \$61 million measure will be allocated to Sonoma County cities and fire districts, with the North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District receiving \$1.4 million, or 2.39% of the sales tax revenue.

The Fire Chiefs are particularly concerned that the current system is not meeting NFPA standards in some parts of the county, particularly in rural areas. In a public statement, the Fire Chiefs noted that “several service gaps exist, especially in the more rural areas where there are currently extended response times to critical medical emergencies and vehicle accident victims.” They also mentioned significant delays in getting an effective firefighting force on scene to keep small fires from becoming major incidents.

“Although we concentrate on providing and improving fire and rescue services for our district, we are part of a larger network,” says Fire Chief Plakos. “Each district is ready to assist neighboring districts in case of an emergency. We sent personnel and vehicles to help fight fires in the Santa Rosa area, and we can depend on other districts to send us help if we need it. But we’re all spread pretty thin, especially in rural areas like ours.”

Chief Plakos points out that our neighboring agency, the Timber Cove Fire Protection District, will also benefit from the tax measure by receiving enough funding to improve their station and hire 24/7 career firefighters from CAL FIRE, as NSCFPD does now. Currently there are no paid responders between Sea Ranch and Bodega Bay. The addition of 24/7 career firefighters in the Timber Cove area will improve response capability for the entire Sonoma County coast.

A Forum will be held on the upcoming sales tax measure at the Del Mar Center at 3:00 p.m. on January 27th to provide an in-depth look at the purpose of the sales tax measure and what it will do to improve fire and emergency response services in Sonoma County and on the North Sonoma Coast.

For further information on the tax measure, see www.safersonomacounty.org. For more information on the North Sonoma Coast Fire Protection District and the Volunteer Firefighter Association see www.northsonomacoastfpd.org and www.tsrvfd.org

