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## El Dorado County considers consolidating rural fire districts

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Published Sunday, Nov. 16, 2008

El Dorado County's financial woes could force several rural fire districts to cut staffing and services, or consider consolidation next year.

The county currently allocates about \$1.3 million annually to help fund eight rural fire districts.

But with the specter of a \$20 million general fund deficit in 2009-10, the county supervisors said money for fire districts may have to be redirected in the next fiscal year.

It's a direction that echoes an April grand jury report.

The grand jury called for stopping subsidies to six of the districts on the county's west slope – Garden Valley, Georgetown, Latrobe, Mosquito, Pioneer and Rescue – and to encourage them to consolidate with larger districts. The remaining districts, Fallen Leaf and Meeks Bay districts near South Lake Tahoe, would find merger difficult because of their geographic isolation.

The grand jury argued that subsidizing the county's small, rural fire districts is unfair to taxpayers in other districts who support their own fire protection services through taxes but also subsidize the rural districts through the county's general fund.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney recently recommended that the county chief administrative officer "notify the fire districts that the end (of supplemental funding) is in sight."

Robert Gill, chief of the Pioneer Fire Protection District in southern El Dorado County, said losing \$279,000 a year from the county would be devastating.

"If we lose that, we'll be closing Station 31 at Willow and laying people off," he said.

The district serves about 8,000 residents and covers 296 square miles, including the communities of Somerset, Mount Aukum, Omo Ranch and Grizzly Flat.

Gill said studies have concluded that because of its location and scattered population, the Pioneer District is not a good candidate for consolidation. But among districts receiving county subsidies, the grand jury noted, Pioneer is the only one in which voters have not approved a special assessment for fire service.

In the Rescue Fire Protection District, the prospect of losing county funding led to a 2003 proposal to join with the neighboring El Dorado Hills Fire Department. But an advisory vote on the proposal was rejected by nearly 73 percent of residents who cast ballots.

Those opposing consolidation said they feared losing local control and community identity.

District board member Ken Humphreys said residents would continue to oppose such a move, even if county assistance ceased. He noted that district voters in 2004 approved an assessment for fire services as a hedge against reduced county and state funding. The assessment, generating about \$200,000 a year, has allowed the district to increase the number of firefighters per engine from two to three, and staff more paramedics.

Humphreys said loss of county monies probably would force the district to reduce staffing to earlier levels.

The Georgetown Fire Protection District covers 960 square miles in northern El Dorado County and borders popular recreation spots in the Eldorado National Forest and the Auburn State Recreation Area.

Although the district receives only \$36,000 annually in county funds, Chief Greg Schwab argued that the entire county benefits from funding the rural districts because fire agencies assist each other.

He cited the 2007 Angora fire near South Lake Tahoe as a prime example.

"To jeopardize funds for local public safety 18 months after 254 homes were lost in the Angora fire doesn't make sense," he said.

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