

# Seeking offers

## Oroville explores outsourcing its fire services following Camp Fire population boom

**City Administrator Bill LaGrone is confronting Oroville's** post-Camp Fire landscape with increased urgency. In a municipality whose population increased by 20 percent following the blaze, he fears public safety service levels are lacking. On Tuesday (Sept. 3), LaGrone, the city's former public safety director, asked the City Council to explore a bold idea: dissolve the city-run fire department in favor of contracting with Cal Fire.

"We are talking about looking at a larger organization that may be able to provide more," LaGrone told the council. "They have a greater depth-of-service. They have a greater depth-of-equipment. They have a greater depth of—not necessarily of knowledge of this community—but they certainly have a greater depth that they can provide."

Fire department staffing and resources have not kept pace with the city's expanding population—now over 21,000 residents—for several decades, requiring cooperative agreements between the city and outside agencies to keep up with calls for service, according to a city staff report. The City Council took a step forward Tuesday by voting to authorize staff to release a request for proposal for fire-protection services for the city, with Cal Fire being the likely applicant.

Contracting with the state agency, according to staff, may improve service at a cost comparable to current spending. The move also may help address a statewide problem that LaGrone said has not spared Oroville residents: rising costs and nonrenewals of homeowner insurance policies. Rate increases and cancellations, he said, may slow down with a larger organization such as Cal Fire providing service to the city.

"The reality is we can't keep up with the growth that's necessary to provide the service," LaGrone told the CN&R after the meeting, explaining that the department employs 15 firefighters, which is a staffing level that hasn't changed since the '90s. "Our fire personnel are great people. It's not about quality. It's about depth. [The city owns] zero helicopters ... zero bulldozers ... zero water tenders."

**Any possible change in fire service will not happen** imminently. LaGrone's PowerPoint presentation to the City Council started with the statement: "No decision will be made tonight." The process could take up to two years to complete, the city administrator said, and it would include public engagement and input.

Any applying agency will be required to present a fire service contract that would not exceed \$2.75



million in its first year, a figure comparable to current city fire costs. The agency also would be required to offer jobs to current staff should they meet the agency's employment criteria.

Other things, LaGrone said, would remain the same. The city's fire station on Lincoln Street would remain open and fire vehicles would include Oroville Fire Department and Cal Fire markings.

The City Council voted 4-3 to authorize city staff to seek proposals for outside fire service, with Councilmembers Linda Draper, Janet Goodson and Art Hatley dissenting.

Goodson noted the city's proposal asks agencies to present a year-one contract that doesn't exceed \$2.75 million, but questioned whether the city would be able to keep up with rising costs—likely 3 percent to 5 percent—in subsequent years. She said revenue generated by Measure U, the city's one-cent sales tax meant to benefit public safety, will reach only so far.

Annual Cal Fire cost increases would be expected, LaGrone said, noting that current city contracts also include contract "escalators." He also told the CN&R that revenue generated from Measure U, which went into effect April 1, is on pace to exceed \$5 million in its first year, a significant amount

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—Cheri Bunker

**The Oroville City Council on Tuesday (Sept. 3) voted to seek proposals from outside agencies to provide fire services for the city.**

PHOTO COURTESY OROVILLE FIRE DEPARTMENT

given the city expected \$4 million would be generated.

The city administrator cautioned that the \$5 million projection is based on one quarter of data. Forces such as the population increase post-Camp Fire, associated recovery efforts and Oroville Dam spillway construction have influenced spending habits in the city and may not continue long-term.

The proposal also was criticized by Cheri Bunker, an Oroville resident who addressed the council during public comment. She said the city explored outsourcing its police and fire services around 2012, and keeping in place its existing services ultimately was more affordable.

"This is not a good idea," Bunker said. "We want our fire department, our fire department. This is our city. It's not Cal Fire, and they don't always go with our ideas of the way things should be."

Exploring ways to improve city services is prudent for spending taxpayer dollars, LaGrone said. When Measure U was passed, the intent was to "enhance" public safety. That may mean bucking the status quo, he added.

It's possible maintaining in-house fire services would ultimately be preferable. Proposals are due to the city by Dec. 4. The City Council could begin interviewing applicants beginning Feb. 4.

"Everybody needs to be calm," LaGrone told the CN&R. "We're just looking at [options]."

—ANDRE BYIK

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