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# El Dorado County could pull funds from rural fire districts

[clocke@sacbee.com](mailto:clocke@sacbee.com)

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A proposal to end county financial assistance to fire districts would result in layoffs, fire station closures and longer response times, according to El Dorado County fire officials.

But some county leaders and a former grand jury say the fire protection system, consisting of 13 independent districts, needs an overhaul to remain fiscally viable.

"Individual fire districts are arcane and need modernization ... This is the 21st century," said county Supervisor Ron Briggs.

The Board of Supervisors will hold a special meeting at 9 a.m. Monday to discuss whether to continue allocating \$1.3 million annually from the county's general fund to supplement the budgets of eight rural fire districts.

Faced with a \$4 million general fund deficit in 2009-10, Gayle Erbe-Hamlin, county chief administrative officer, has recommended ending the aid to fire districts to help balance the county's budget.

But fire officials have turned up the heat. The El Dorado County Fire Chiefs Association and El Dorado County Emergency Services Authority issued a joint news release saying the loss of funding would threaten fire protection countywide. They urged residents to attend Monday's meeting to support their local fire district and to call or e-mail the county supervisors. Some districts also have sent out fliers encouraging residents to weigh in.

The fire chiefs argue that the county has an obligation to assist fire districts that serve large, rural areas but whose tax base is lower than those of other fire districts, due in part to policies in the county's general plan.

"Most of the inequity was created by years of development and increased recreational uses," Brian Veerkamp said.

Veerkamp is chief of the El Dorado Hills Fire Department and chairman of the Emergency Services Authority, a joint powers authority that oversees ambulance service in the county.

People moving into rural areas expect the same level of service they had in the urban areas they came from, but those rural areas generate less property tax, he noted. Rural fire districts also serve popular recreation areas, but visitors don't contribute to the property tax base.

The largely urban El Dorado Hills district does not receive county funds, but Veerkamp supports continued aid to rural districts, including neighboring Rescue and Latrobe.

The 2007-08 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 general fund.

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

Because districts have agreements to aid each other as needed in fires and medical emergencies, Veerkamp said El Dorado Hills firefighters likely would have to respond to more mutual aid calls if the rural districts had to curtail services. El Dorado Hills taxpayers still would pick up the slack, but response times in the rural areas would increase.

Tom Keating, Rescue Fire Protection District chief and president of the county Fire Chiefs Association, said eliminating the funding also would hinder potential consolidation efforts.

"If aid to fire goes away, what would be the incentive for larger districts to take over eight smaller districts that have no money?" he asked.

Jose Henriquez, executive officer of the El Dorado Local Agency Formation Commission, which oversees government reorganizations, said the situation is particularly serious for such agencies as the Latrobe Fire Protection District, which relies on the county subsidy for 50 percent of its budget.

If a district ceases to be financially viable, it can petition LAFCO for dissolution. "But before you can dissolve a district, you have to name a successor," Henriquez said. If no other agency is willing to provide the service, he said, "it becomes kind of district in purgatory ... and that state of limbo doesn't serve anybody."

Supervisor Briggs suggests the solution may be a countywide agency to oversee fire and ambulance service.

The fire chiefs say they recognize changes are necessary but that they need the county supervisors' help. "We are willing to work on a long-term plan, whether it's consolidation or financial stability of the districts," Keating said, "but they need to be partners."