

ABSTRACT

Recently, the Morongo Valley Community Services District (“MVCSD” or “CSD”) was unable to provide effective and efficient fire and emergency medical services. As early as December 2021, its structure was not operationally or financially capable of providing effective fire and emergency medical services to the Morongo Valley community.

This special study is designed as an educational document and is primarily intended for the Morongo Valley community. It does not include specific recommendations but instead provides information on the state of the Morongo Valley Community District’s fire operations, as well as the challenges that many rural fire agencies are facing. The study does identify options for consideration which can be used by the community and the CSD to help shape a viable fire and emergency services operation in Morongo Valley.

Morongo Valley CSD

In 1958, voters approved the formation of the Morongo Valley Community Services District. The CSD is an independent special district with a five-member board of directors, elected at large, and encompasses approximately 24 square miles. The major roadway in Morongo Valley is State Route 62. A high rate of accidents and fatalities on SR-62 has long been a concern and strains the fire and emergency medical response resources of the CSD.

Currently, LAFCO authorizes the CSD to provide the following functions: fire protection, park and recreation, and streetlighting. In 2001, the CSD transitioned from a volunteer staff to a mix of paid staff and reserve firefighters. In 2002, following approval of an assessment, the CSD’s fire function expanded to include advance life support (paramedic) services. Although there are industry guidelines, there are no mandatory federal or state regulations directing the level of fire service staffing, response performance, or outcomes. The level of fire protection and emergency medical services provided is a local policy decision, and communities have the level of services they desire or can afford. However, the body of regulations and guidelines on fire services provides that if services are provided at all, they must be done so with the safety of the firefighters and citizens in mind.

Previous Studies

LAFCO has conducted three reviews or studies related to the MVCSD since 2012. The most recent, the *Countywide Service Review for Fire Protection/Emergency Medical Services/Dispatch*, recommended that MVCSD District coordinate with the County to: (1) seek local, state and federal grants and funding to support the Morongo Valley Fire Department and maintain local control; (2) advocate to Caltrans to decrease traffic speeds on State Route 62 to 40 MPH through the Morongo Valley business district, and (3) work with the California Highway Patrol to increase law enforcement activities along State Route 62, including enforcing any reduced traffic speeds.

Recent MVCSD Actions

At its meeting of December 15, 2021, the MVCSD Board appointed an Interim Director of Operations. At that same meeting, the CSD President and one Director resigned from the CSD Board of Directors. To increase the applicant pool for vacant CSD fire vacancies, the Board also approved changes to the employment MOU which allows part-time employment

for firefighters and paramedics and permits the hiring of Emergency Medical Responders (EMRs). These recent actions came after a series of contentious Board meetings regarding the fire department’s ongoing staffing, leadership and financial challenges.

Financial Challenges

LAFCO has long identified the CSD’s severe fiscal constraints which continue to challenge the organization’s short-term viability and limit organizational alternatives which could permanently address service shortfalls in the long-term. The margin for error in budgeting for the CSD remains thin. Should any of the following occur, then the district’s short-term viability would be in jeopardy: (1) immediate replacement of the current fire truck, (2) OES cancels the contract or recalls the wild land fire truck, (3) any other major expense.

For example, the CSD gained \$60,042 in fund balance in FY 2017-18. If it were not for being able to send strike teams (and receive reimbursement from Cal Fire), expenditures would have exceeded revenues. According to the FY 2017-18 audit, this income covered many unanticipated expenses with repairs to aging buildings and fire equipment.

Options

As stated previously, there are no recommendation in this report. For consideration, LAFCO has identified four options to restructure CSD operations. All will likely require some type of additional funding (beyond the current assessment) to ensure viability.

Options	Challenges
Assumption of fire and emergency medical services by San Bernardino County Fire Protection District and its South Desert Service Zone	Will require some type of additional funding (e.g., parcel tax, etc.). Will result in increased response times if service comes from Yucca Valley. Will cost much more if County Fire assumes the current CSD fire station.
Assumption of fire and emergency medical services by California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (Cal Fire)	Will require some type of additional funding (e.g., parcel tax, etc.). Will result in increased response times if service comes from Yucca Valley.
Reduction of district fire protection level of service until it reaches a sustainable level financially, recognizing the requirement to have a full-time paid paramedic position to continue to receive its benefit assessment	Will likely continue to strain the CSD’s limited resources, jeopardize the agency’s ability to attract and retain employees, and compromise service levels over the long-term.
Provide the level of service desired by the community: paramedic and two crews, three shifts, with redundancy, proper training, and adequate equipment	Will require some type of additional funding (e.g., parcel tax, etc.)