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2018 – 2019 Plumas County Civil Grand Jury

Portola Fire Protection and Emergency Medical Services Report

SUMMARY

In December 2017 the City of Portola decided to stand down its Volunteer Fire Department and enter into a contract with Eastern Plumas Fire for fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) coverage. The 2018-2019 Plumas County Civil Grand Jury decided to investigate the current status of Portola's fire and EMS coverage. The Grand Jury also wanted to know if the City of Portola intended to try to re-establish its Volunteer Fire Department, or pursue other long-term means of offering fire and EMS coverage to the residents of Portola.

The investigation found that the City of Portola has entered into a two-year contract with the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire Protection District (Eastern Plumas Rural Fire) to provide fire and EMS coverage for the City of Portola. At present, the Portola City officials interviewed seem satisfied with the coverage and services the City is receiving from Eastern Plumas Rural Fire. And, Eastern Plumas Rural Fire has expressed its willingness to continue a long-term fire and EMS contract after the current contract expires on June 30, 2020.

The City of Portola officials interviewed also said they would like to try to re-establish an active Volunteer Fire Department sometime in the future. The Civil Grand Jury found that due to the difficulty in finding qualified volunteers, plus the high financial costs of supporting a volunteer fire department, this might not be Portola's best option for providing fire and EMS coverage for its residents.

Therefore, the Civil Grand Jury recommends that the City of Portola forgo its efforts to re-establish its Volunteer Fire Department and instead extend and deepen its partnering with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire with a Joint Powers Agreement.

BACKGROUND

Before October 13, 2017, the City of Portola had a functioning volunteer fire department, providing the residents of Portola and Gold Mountain fire protection and EMS coverage. With 13 volunteers, the Portola Volunteer Fire Department operated out of two fire stations (316 First Avenue and 420 Gulling Street). The Portola Volunteer Fire Department was equipped with six emergency response vehicles:

- (2) Type 1 Fire Engines
- (1) Water tender
- (1) Medical Rescue Vehicle
- (1) Type 6 Wild Land Engine
- (1) Command Vehicle (SUV)

Due to complaints and deficiencies in performance received from law enforcement and Northern California EMS, Inc. (Nor-Cal EMS) the Portola Volunteer Fire Department stopped all EMS calls on October 13, 2017. The Beckwourth Fire Protection District assumed EMS coverage for the City of Portola and the Graeagle Fire Protection District for Gold Mountain. On October 27, 2017 Eastern Plumas Rural Fire assumed EMS coverage for Portola and Gold Mountain, releasing Beckwourth and Graeagle Fire Protection Districts from their interim commitments. During this time the Portola Volunteer Fire Department continued to respond to all fire calls. On December 13, 2017 the Portola City Council approved the cessation of all operations and the dissolution of the Portola Volunteer Fire Department. Eastern Plumas Rural Fire, per a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the City of Portola, assumed fire and EMS coverage for the City of Portola. On July 1, 2018 the City of Portola entered into a formal, two-year contract with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire for fire and EMS coverage.

METHODOLOGY

The 2018-2019 Plumas County Civil Grand Jury approached its investigation of these matters by interviewing:

- Elected and appointed City of Portola officials;
- An Eastern Plumas Rural Fire officer and a member of the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire's Board of Directors; and
- A Plumas Local Agency Formation Commission (Plumas LAFCo) staff officer.

The 2018-2019 Plumas County Civil Grand Jury also reviewed the following documents:

- The City of Portola's Volunteer Fire Department budget for the years 2014 through 2018;
- The Eastern Plumas Rural Fire's budgets for 2017 and 2018;
- The contract between the City of Portola and the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire;
- The Portola Volunteer Fire Department Standard Operating Guidelines;
- The Portola Volunteer Fire Department Policies and Procedures Manual;
- A map of the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire's response area;
- A Plumas LAFCo Memorandum dated October 15, 2018 with a subject line of *Fire Service Provision Status and Service Structure Options*; and
- A Plumas LAFCo Power Point presentation entitled *Eastern Plumas Regional Fire Service Options*, which was presented to town hall meetings in Portola and at a Gold Mountain Community Service District Board meeting.

The Civil Grand Jury also inspected the City of Portola's two fire stations and first response equipment. Additionally, there was a review of the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire's manning level and the number and type of apparatuses they deployed for fire and EMS responses.

DISCUSSION

The Dissolution of the Portola Volunteer Fire Department

As noted in the Background section of this report, on December 13, 2017 the Portola City Council approved the complete stand down of all Portola Volunteer Fire Department functions. This decision was the conclusion of a two-month process that began on October 10, 2017 and was instigated due to complaints and deficiencies reported by law enforcement and Nor-Cal EMS. The timeline of events that led to a complete stand down of the Portola Volunteer Fire Department is as follows:

- October 11, 2017: The Portola City Council approved the formation of an ad hoc Portola Volunteer Fire Department Management Advisory Committee. All authority over the Portola Volunteer Fire Department was assigned to the City Manager, or in absence of the City Manager, to the city's Mayor or Mayor Pro Tem.
- October 13, 2017: The Beckwourth Fire Protection District took over first responder EMS coverage for the City of Portola. The Graeagle Fire Protection District assumed EMS coverage for Gold Mountain. The Portola Volunteer Fire Department continued to respond to all fire calls.
- October 27, 2017: Eastern Plumas Rural Fire assumed EMS coverage for the City of Portola and Gold Mountain.
- December 13, 2017: The Portola City Council approved the complete stand down of the Portola Volunteer Fire Department from all fire and EMS responses.

In order for the City of Portola to ensure adequate fire and EMS coverage to its residents, the Portola City Council signed, on December 15, 2017, a 60-day MOU for fire and EMS coverage with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire. This 60-day MOU with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire was periodically renewed until a two-year contract with the City of Portola was signed and activated on July 1, 2018. This contract provides for the payment to Eastern Plumas Rural Fire of \$60,000 annually for fire and EMS coverage. The contract allows Eastern Plumas Rural Fire to use both of the City of Portola's fire stations, as well as, all operable vehicles and all useable fire and EMS equipment and supplies.

Plans to Re-establish the Portola Volunteer Fire Department

The City of Portola hopes that this two-year contract will give the City enough time to recruit 12 to 15 volunteers needed to re-establish the Portola Volunteer Fire Department. These volunteers would get their necessary training and experience by volunteering with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire. To help facilitate this recruitment and the necessary training the Portola City Council adopted on March 3, 2018 a new *Portola Volunteer Fire Department Standard Operating*

Guidelines (SOG). This new SOG mirrors the SOG of Eastern Plumas Rural Fire. The new SOG would allow potential Portola Volunteer Fire Department volunteers who are currently volunteering with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire to train and operate under the same SOG they would be subject to as volunteer firefighters and EMS providers for the city of Portola. It is hoped that this standardization will help facilitate a smooth transition for Portola volunteers to a newly established Portola Volunteer Fire Department.

Once Portola has a sufficient number of qualified volunteers the City would attempt to hire a Fire Chief with an annual base salary of approximately \$45,000. This paid Fire Chief would then provide professional leadership in building up and managing a newly formed Portola Volunteer Fire Department.

Challenges in Re-establishing the Portola Volunteer Fire Department

The City of Portola faces difficult challenges in initiating this plan. The first hurdle the City of Portola faces in re-establishing a future Volunteer Fire Department is declining volunteerism. Across the country there has been a decline in volunteers. Plumas County reflects this decline, as is evident in the cancellation of the 2018 Plumas County Fire Academy in Quincy and other County fire training events due to the lack of volunteers. It should be noted that none of Portola's previous volunteers switched over to Eastern Plumas Rural Fire when the City of Portola disbanded their Volunteer Fire Department. It should also be noted that the City of Portola and the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire officials interviewed stated they were skeptical that the City of Portola would be able to recruit enough qualified and eligible volunteers to re-establish the Portola Volunteer Fire Department.

The second obstacle the City of Portola faces in re-establishing a Volunteer Fire Department is funding. Before the City of Portola stood down their Volunteer Fire Department the Fire Department had an annual operating budget of approximately \$90,000. However, expenditures for the Fire Department during the fiscal years of 2014-2015 through 2017-2018 ranged from \$122,000 to \$343,000, for an average operating cost of \$196,644.73 per year. Revenue intake for Portola's Volunteer Fire Department during these same fiscal years ranged from \$52,000 to \$274,000, for an average Fire Department revenue flow of \$105,323.91 per year. The difference in revenue flow and operating expenditures for these four fiscal years is a deficit of \$91,320.82. The City of Portola covered the difference in expenses and revenue out of the City's General Fund and the use of grant monies for the years 2014-2015 (\$2,600.00), 2015-2016 (\$4,500.00) and 2017-2018 (\$188,981.00). According to the Portola City officials interviewed, future plans to re-establish the City's Volunteer Fire Department would have an added expense of approximately \$45,000 for a paid fire chief. The Plumas LAFCo Memorandum, dated October 15, 2018, highlights the funding challenges the City of Portola and other fire districts face:

“Fire providers around the State have faced several challenges over the decade in providing an adequate and sustainable level of services, primarily as a result of ever-increasing costs associated with equipment, training requirements, gas, etc., combined with severely constrained funding from declining tax revenues, State tax shifts, and lack of support for new tax measures. Providers that rely heavily on volunteer firefighters and administration have been most impacted by these constraints.”

The City of Portola therefore faces an uphill battle in re-establishing its Volunteer Fire Department. Although the Civil Grand Jury did not conduct an independent assessment of performance adequacy as part of its investigation, the City officials interviewed were quite satisfied with the fire and EMS coverage they were receiving from Eastern Plumas Rural Fire. The City of Portola's current contract with Eastern Plumas Rural Fire is also a cost effective way for the City of Portola to provide fire and EMS coverage to its residents.

Eastern Plumas Rural Fire and the City of Portola

The Eastern Plumas Rural Fire has approximately 20 volunteers, (the number of volunteers may fluctuate 5-10% at any given time), which include:

- (4) Emergency Medical Responders (EMR)
- (5) Emergency Medical Technicians (EMT)
- (4) Advanced Emergency Medical Technicians (AEMT)
- (1) Paramedic

Eastern Plumas Rural Fire, excluding assets acquired from Portola per their two-year contract, has 13 fire and EMS vehicles located at four stations:

- (1) Utility Truck
- (2) Type 1 Fire Engines
- (1) Type 2 Fire Engine
- (2) Type 3 Fire Engines
- (2) Type 6 fire engines
- (1) Ladder Truck
- (3) Water Tenders
- (1) Medical Rescue Vehicle

Before Eastern Plumas Rural Fire assumed both fire and EMS coverage for the City of Portola and Gold Mountain, it was responding to about 12 to 15 calls per month. Now Eastern Plumas Rural Fire is responding to approximately 45 to 50 calls per month. About ninety percent (90%) of these calls are for EMS responses. An Eastern Plumas Rural Fire officer stated that although this has put a stress on the department, they are able to handle the increased call volume. Furthermore, as Eastern Plumas Rural Fire expands its funding base due to the additional \$60,000 in annual revenue from the City of Portola and tax revenue from Gold Mountain, (a total increase in revenue of nearly 150%), it will be able to increase its fire-fighting and EMS resources.

The response area of Eastern Plumas Rural Fire, prior to the addition of Portola, encircled Portola. Furthermore, Eastern Plumas Rural Fire has six Eastern Plumas Rural Fire volunteers

who now live within the City limits of Portola. Considering that Eastern Plumas Rural Fire can now respond out of Portola's two fire stations, Eastern Plumas Rural Fire believes that it is able to provide a timely response to fire or EMS needs in Portola.

An Alternative Plan to Re-establishing the Portola Volunteer Fire Department

Considering the difficulties the City of Portola faces in re-establishing its Volunteer Fire Department and their satisfaction with the coverage it is currently receiving from Eastern Plumas Rural Fire it would make sense for the City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire to continue to build upon their working relationship. The two most timely and reasonable avenues for the City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire to continue their partnering would be to either have Portola extend their two-year contract beyond 2020 or have Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire deepen their partnership with a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA).

A continuation of the current contract between the City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire would maintain the current status quo and offers the path of least resistance for the City of Portola to provide its residents with fire and EMS coverage.

However, the advantage of a JPA is that it would necessitate the formation of a separate decision making body that would work collaboratively with the City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire to maximize their resources in providing fire and EMS coverage. Such a JPA collaborative effort could also include Gold Mountain, as Gold Mountain is within Eastern Plumas Rural Fire's response area. The pros and cons of a JPA are:

Pros

- Better leveraging of resources
- Elimination of duplications, such as administration
- Improved consistency on policies and practices
- Regional planning and implementation

Cons

- Does not address areas outside of Plumas LAFCo approved boundaries

The Civil Grand Jury commends the excellent working relationship the City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire have developed in providing fire and EMS coverage for the residents of Portola. This Civil Grand Jury also commends the men and women of Eastern Plumas Rural Fire for their professionalism in assuming the additional time and effort to provide the residents of Portola with fire and EMS coverage. The City of Portola and Eastern Plumas Rural Fire have set a high standard of collaborative teamwork for Plumas County.

FINDINGS

- F1. The Civil Grand Jury finds that recruiting 12 to 15 qualified volunteers to re-establish the City of Portola's Volunteer Fire Department would be a very difficult task.
- F2. The Civil Grand Jury finds that the financial cost to the City of Portola to re-establish and operate the Portola Volunteer Fire Department with a paid Fire Chief is not cost effective for the City.
- F3. The Civil Grand Jury finds that the City of Portola officials interviewed are satisfied with the fire and EMS coverage the City of Portola is currently receiving from the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire.
- F4. The Civil Grand Jury finds the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire is well equipped with personnel and equipment to provide fire and EMS coverage for the City of Portola.
- F5. The Civil Grand Jury finds that the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire is strategically located geographically to provide a timely response to fire and EMS calls in the City of Portola.
- F6. The Civil Grand Jury finds that the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire is willing to continue providing the City of Portola with contractual fire and EMS coverage once their current contract with the City of Portola expires on June 30, 2020.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1-6. The 2018-2019 Plumas County Civil Grand Jury recommends that the Portola City Council and the Board of Directors for the Eastern Plumas Rural Fire Protection District enter into a Joint Powers Agreement for mutual fire and EMS coverage when the current contract expires on June 30, 2020.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal Code section 933.05, the Civil Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

From the following governing bodies:

- The Portola City Council F1-F3, and R1
- Eastern Plumas Rural Fire Protection District Board of Directors F4-F6, and R1

INVITED RESPONSES

The Presiding Judge may respond to the entire report.

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code section 929 requires that reports of the Civil Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.
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