

# Community Outreach

## The North County Fire Protection District



# The Whole Story: Questions & Answers

### **Question 1: What is the North County Fire Protection District?**

**Answer:** The North County Fire Protection District is a “Special District” that was created to provide comprehensive fire, rescue, and emergency medical services to the Northern San Diego County communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall and Rainbow.

### **Question 2: What is a Special District?**

**Answer:** A Special District is a form of local government created by a community to meet specific needs that are not being supplied by existing general purpose governments, such as cities or counties; these include, for example, fire protection, sewage, water, pest abatement management, and more.

Most Special Districts are governed by an independent Board of Directors, who are elected by registered voters within the District’s jurisdiction (geographic service area).

Special Districts CANNOT create, nor raise, taxes without the consent of voters within the District.

### **Question 3: What is the precise MISSION and Vision of the North County Fire Protection District?**

**Answer:** The Mission of North County Fire Protection District is to meet our community’s expectations through excellence in public safety and service. It is our shared vision to be a trusted and respected public safety leader, committed to ensuring the safest community possible through service, collaboration and innovation.

### **Question 4: What specific services are provided by/thru the NCFPD?**

**Answer:** Primary services include: fire suppression, emergency medical services, technical rescue and response to traffic accidents. Other services include hazardous materials response, swift water rescue, fire prevention, fire investigations, public assistance requests, public education, a youth fire explorer program, and weed abatement.

### **Question 5: How is the District currently funded?**

**Answer:** Approximately 80% of the primary funding for NCFPD comes from property taxes (80%). Other revenue sources include: ambulance fees, cost recovery, developer impact fees, donations, grants, plan review and inspection fees, cell tower revenue and annexation fees.

The NCFPD **cannot** assess sales tax, franchise tax or traffic impact fees.

**Question 6: What is the District's geographic service area?**

**Answer:** The North County Fire Protection District serves a geographic area of approximately 92 square miles, with a population estimated at 55,000 residents in the unincorporated San Diego County communities of Fallbrook, Bonsall and Rainbow. The District also provides emergency medical transportation services for 40 additional square miles outside its primary service area.

**Question 7: How many fire stations and staff comprise the fire protection District?**

**Answer:** The District operates 5 fire stations. 3 paramedic ambulances, and is supported by approximately 53 full-time fire suppression personnel, 9 support personnel, 6 paramedics, 20 EMTs, and between 20 to 25 volunteers at any given time.

**Question 8: Why is the North County Fire Protection District reaching out to residents throughout its service area?**

**Answer:** The primary reason is this:

- Based upon a recent survey of constituents throughout the District's service area, **most residents (89%) are aware that they are served by the NCFPD**; in fact, most of these constituents (85%) are "extremely aware" of this fact, AND...
- Approximately eighty percent (79%) of residents believe the NCFPD is doing an **excellent job** at protecting local residents from fire danger and providing emergency medical services; in fact, nearly sixty percent (59%) "strongly agree" with this perception, YET...
- Only about half (51%) of local voters are aware of the fact that the **NCFPD has been struggling** with financial challenges over the past ten years; less than one third (30%) said there were "extremely aware" of this reality.

Therefore, District officials concluded that it is imperative to reach out to residents throughout its service area to provide a **COMPLETE PICTURE** of the fire prevention/protection and medical services presently being provided, INCLUDING the challenges presently facing the District that have to be addressed if the District is to maintain the high level of services presently being delivered through the Agency. Clearly, if these services are allowed to deteriorate, the *quality of life* for ALL residents throughout this geographic region will be negatively impacted in no small way.

**Question 9: What caused the fiscal challenges presently facing the fire protection District?**

**Answer:** Most of these financial challenges stem from the **Great Recession** that began in December 2007 and lasted thru June 2009 — which began with the bursting of an 8 trillion dollar housing bubble.

**Question 10: Has NCFPD always provided ambulance services to residents?**

**Answer:** Yes, however, in 1990, NCFPD augmented its level of service by creating a paramedic program; this resulted in 25% increase in staff, as well as an annual increase in operational costs of over \$900,000. Unfortunately, there was no additional funding from the County of San Diego to pay for this added service, which meant that the District had to absorb this added cost of operations by reallocating funds that were intended to provide other services and replace firefighting equipment and facilities that had outlived their useful life. Furthermore, the cost of providing these services continues to increase annually.

**Question 11: What impact have these fiscal challenges had on the services presently being provided by and through the North County Fire Protection District?**

**Answer:**

- There has been a significant increase in the number of calls for emergency medical service.
- As a result, in order to maintain adequate levels of service, the District was forced to subsidize paramedic ambulance service; in turn, forcing the District to reallocate its available funds.
- This, in turn, resulted in a significant delay in fire station construction, fire engine & other capital equipment purchases, as well as increasing the District's deferred facility maintenance.

**Question 12: What are the consequences of the Fallbrook hospital closing in 2015?**

**Answer:** After more than 50 years serving local communities, Fallbrook Hospital was forced to close in 2015. This resulted in the NCFPD having to begin transporting patients to hospitals that are two to three times the distance further than the Fallbrook Hospital, which increases response times as District ambulances become tied up for longer periods of time at more distant hospitals. As a cost cutting measure, last year the District converted its ambulance personnel to single role paramedics and EMTs, which are not trained as firefighters. This has reduced the total number of firefighters available in the District for major wildfires, and will result in higher turnover of these critical personnel. The administrative burden associated with maintaining such a program is estimated to be approximately \$350,000 per year.

**Question 13: Are there any fiscal challenges facing the District today that will negatively impact the level of ambulance service being provided through the NCFPD?**

**Answer:** Yes. Following the closure of Fallbrook hospital in 2015, the Department of Homeland Security awarded the NCFPD a \$1.1 million grant, which paid for staffing for one ambulance. Unfortunately, this grant expired in March, 2018; placing even additional pressure on the District to maintain status quo. To address this challenge, the District reduced the number of firefighters to add additional EMS personnel to staff a 3<sup>rd</sup> ambulance.

**Question 14: What other options are available to address these fiscal challenges?**

**Answer:** An option for further reducing the District's cost of providing ambulance service to our Community is to privatize ambulance services. Should this happen, the cost of medical transports to local residents would likely increase as much as 80%; furthermore, Fallbrook and Bonsall residents will have no local control as to the quality of services that are provided through private ambulance companies. Ambulance response times would also likely increase by several minutes.

**Question 15: What are some of the current needs of the NCFPD?****Answer:**

A recent assessment of the District fire protection facilities, including fire stations and firefighting apparatus, documented a need for \$26.5 million in order to meet facility standards. Other needs include, but are not limited to:

- Current fire stations have inadequate living and sleeping quarters.
- Fire stations DO NOT have adequate separation of vehicles and equipment from living spaces.
- Fire stations have inadequate storage space for firefighting equipment.
- Several of the existing fire facilities ARE NOT earthquake standard compliant.
- Current fire stations and other District facilities do not meet the needs of the current workforce (e.g. accommodating for workplace diversity, room for exercise and training, clean room storage areas, sufficient security, delayed response due to living quarters separation).
- Current funding does not account for the increasing Fallbrook population, and for meeting the emergency response requirements.
- This assessment also identified that an annual commitment of \$950,000 was needed in order for the District to maintain its fire protection facilities operational and meeting firefighting standards.

**Question 16: What are the current response time(s) to calls, and how is the current state of the facilities impacting this?**

**Answer:** The current district-wide average response time is approximately 6 minutes and 50 seconds; NCFPD's objective is to REDUCE the response time closer to 6 minutes to better service our community.

Major factors that contribute to impacting the response times include the condition of the fire stations; for example, having to navigate through several buildings in order to get to the fire truck, overcrowding of fire stations, and outdated facilities.

**Question 17: Do ALL of the stations/facilities need to be rebuilt?**

**Answer:** No; but many do. For example, 7 of the 11 fire protection facilities are near or at the end of their useful life, with four of these being over 50 years of age according to the recent facilities study. In fact, one fire station, Station 4, is still in a mobile home.

**Question 18: Can't you just 'fix' the current stations, instead of building new?**

**Answer:** While this may appear to be a good idea, upon investigating this alternative it turns out that it would cost nearly the same to bring some of the buildings up to code as compared to constructing new facilities.

**Question 19: How do the crowded conditions at the local fire stations adversely affect firefighters?**

**Answer:** First, there is a shortage of sleeping quarters at the NCFPD fire stations; moreover, during times of emergency when additional firefighters are brought into the local fire station from outside of Fallbrook to assist in supporting wildfires, many have to sleep on the floor.

Furthermore, not only do firefighters face a much higher risk of getting cancer than the average citizen, due to the existing over-crowded facilities, where firetrucks are lodged in the same space as firefighting gear and workout facilities, the threat of cancer is further exacerbated.

**Question 20: NCFPD is currently an 'unincorporated' district. Are there benefits of becoming an 'incorporated' district?**

**Answer:** There is little to no benefit in becoming an incorporated district; in fact, the fire protection District would receive **less** funding than it does today if it were to be incorporated.

**Question 21: Why can't the new home developers (Horse creek, etc.) pay for a new fire station?**

**Answer:** We are limited to charging Fire Mitigation Fees and Mello Roos Fees. Mello Roos fees have a collective cap of 1% (for a total of 2%).

**Question 22: What proportion of your budget is dedicated to facility construction?**

**Answer:** We dedicate approximately \$100,000 annually to facility maintenance. We have approximately \$1M in reserves from accumulated developer impact fees. We have applied for grants for fire station construction however have been unsuccessful.

**Question 23: Why does a fire station cost so much to build?**

**Answer:** Any public works construction project in excess of \$1,000 requires payment of prevailing wages. Throughout the years Districts have tried various methods to avoid prevailing wage legislation (e.g. lease/leaseback); however the courts as well as the Department of Industrial Relations (DIR) have broadly interpreted prevailing wage law. The only way to avoid prevailing wage would be for the District to hire general contractors and skilled tradespeople to perform the work, however in the process we would also assume all of the liability for worker's compensation claims as well as any cost overruns. Additionally, public facilities such as fire stations must meet the Essential Services Buildings Seismic Safety Act of 1986, which requires such buildings to meet or exceed 150% of the earthquake safety standards currently in place, which drives up the cost per construction (currently \$700 per square foot).

**Question 24: Have local residents been asked for their input?**

**Answer:** **Yes.** The District commissioned a scientific survey of local voters in late 2017.

This survey showed, on the one hand, that residents throughout the District are extremely aware of the fact that they rely upon the NCFPD for fire protection and emergency services (such as paramedic and ambulance services) AND they are extremely pleased with the level of service presently being provided through the fire protection District; on the other hand, they ARE NOT aware of the fact that the District is presently facing significant financial challenges that, if not addressed soon, will result in the level of fire protection and emergency services having to be cut back in no small way.

**Question 25: What has the District done in an effort to reduce operating costs?**

**Answer:** The District has taken multiple steps to reduce operating costs. Some of these include:

- Converted ambulance staffing to non-firefighting personnel to save on payroll and benefit costs.
- Left four administrative staff positions unfilled for over 5 years.
- Increased use of part-time positions.
- Employees pay a portion toward their retirement, and have agreed to forego a portion of future raises to pay down future pension obligations.
- Identified surplus real estate (property) to sell in order to generate funding for addressing some of these fiscal challenges
- Purchased facilities that were formerly leased (e.g., administrative building).
- District actively fought for the abolishment of the **State Fire Fee**, for which District and the communities it serves received no additional benefits.
- Installed solar at 4 fire stations to reduce utility costs.

In fact, the District came in under budget last year, thus was able to add monies to its Capital Budget and address future capital equipment needs such as: (fire engines, ambulances, etc.).

**Question 26: Will there be citizen oversight**

**Answer:** YES. The District has formed a **Citizens' Oversight Committee** to monitor the community outreach activities.

**Question 27: How is the District reaching out to residents within its service area?**

**Answer:** District officials believe that local residents should be FULLY INFORMED regarding the level of fire protection and emergency services being provided through the District; this includes BOTH the outstanding quality of services be provided, as well as the pressing challenges currently facing the NCFPD District officials.

Toward that end, this present community outreach effort consists of:

- (i) Traditional media, including a **News Tabloid** mailed to each household within the District' service area.
- (ii) District's Web Site
- (iii) Comprehensive Social media effort, including:
  - 1. *Facebook*
  - 2. *Twitter*
  - 3. *Nextdoor*
  - 4. *YouTube*
  - 5. *Facebook Live* (on-line discussions with such City officials as the Fire Chief, Stephen Abbott; Board President, other individuals who are active in the communities being served by the NCFPD.

**Question 28: Can I talk directly to District officials share my opinions and ask questions and/or express my concerns regarding the needs of the North County Fire Protection District?**

**Answer:** ABSOLUTELY! This can be done by calling the fire District's headquarters OR through the social media. The District will also be setting up several 'live' chats with such District officials, beginning with the Fire Chief, Stephen Abbott, members of the Board of Directors, and other "informed" individuals throughout the communities being served by the fire protection District; as well as through *Facebook Live*, which will give you the opportunity speak directly with these individuals and pose questions in 'real time'.

**Question 29: Where can I find more information and reading materials regarding the financial challenges presently facing the District AND the consequences of NOT addressing these challenges in a timely manner?**

**Answer:** Please go directly to the District's website <https://www.ncfireprotectiondistrict.org/> and click the tab '**Community Outreach**'. All articles and related materials, including links to social media pages, can be found there. Also, the Q&A will continue to be updated.

**Question 30: What are the social media links where I can go to secure more information about the NCFPD and the challenges facing the District?**

**Answer:**

**Facebook.com**

<https://www.facebook.com/NorthCountyFire>

**Twitter:**

<https://twitter.com/northcountyfire?lang=en>

**Youtube Link:**

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCBKUso0hCDLdYdc1TqqUkLA>

**Nextdoor Link:**

Search for 'North County Fire Protection District' in your search function of your Nextdoor account

**Website:**

<https://www.ncfireprotectiondistrict.org/> and click on 'community outreach'

**Question 31: What is Prop 'A'?**

The funding Measure is called: Proposition 'A' (or Prop A). Assuming Prop A receives requisite voter support needed for passage, these monies will be used to address a set of fiscal challenges that, if not addressed soon, will result in a significant reduction in levels of such services as fire protection, paramedic and ambulance services, and other services that the District presently provides to residents throughout north San Diego County.

**Why is Additional Funding Needed?**

Most of these financial challenges stem from initiation of a paramedic ambulance program nearly 30 years ago, without seeking taxpayer support. There has since been a significant increase in the number of calls for emergency medical service, made worse by closure of Fallbrook Hospital in 2014. In order to maintain adequate levels of service, the District has been forced to subsidize paramedic ambulance service; in turn, forcing the District to reallocate its available funds. This resulted in a significant delay in fire station construction, fire engine & other capital equipment purchases, as well as increasing the District's deferred facility maintenance. This is exacerbated by the fact that 7 of the District's 11 facilities (including 4 of its 5 fire stations) have exceeded (or are nearing) their "useful life," which is 50 years. One fire station is in a mobile home and the District's training facility is in a modular building.

**There's Nowhere Else to Cut**

District officials have taken major strides in an effort to reduce operating costs. There's literally nowhere else to cut without negatively impacting the levels of service being provided through the fire protection and emergency services District.



### Multiple Alternatives were Investigated

Before making a decision to ask local voters to authorize a modest tax to address these fiscal challenges, District officials looked at various alternatives for addressing these growing challenges. These included: (i) station closures; (ii) reducing the fire protection District's work force (including firefighters, paramedics, and support staff; (iii) reorganizing ambulance services; (iv) consolidate the NCFPD with neighboring fire protection and emergency service agencies or cities; among others. However, each one had a downside that exceeded the upside.

### Residents were Asked for their Input

Further, rather than simply placing a funding Measure on the local ballot without seeking input from the community, the District commissioned a scientific survey of registered voters and property owners. Respondents to the survey were told of the District's pressing fiscal challenges and asked: (i) would you be willing to authorize such a tax, and (ii) how much would you be willing to pay to make it possible for the District to address these needs, thus avoid having to make cut-backs in the level of services being provided to residents throughout the region. The answer was \$5/month, which amounts to \$60/year per parcel of property owned within the District's service area. District officials listened; which explains why the "ask" is \$5/mth (\$60/yr per parcel of property owned) in the upcoming funding Measure.

### Questions Answered

District officials want to provide answers to any and all questions/concerns that local residents may have regarding Prop A. Thus, if you have questions, please visit the NCFPD website at: <https://www.ncfireprotectiondistrict.org/> and click on 'Prop A'. Or, you are welcome to contact Fire Chief Steve Abbott at [sabbott@ncfire.org](mailto:sabbott@ncfire.org) or call him at: (760) 723-2012. Of course, you are welcome to stop into NCFPD headquarters at: 330 S Main Ave, Fallbrook.

## Prop A ballot language

To avoid a significant reduction in the level of services presently being provided to residents throughout north San Diego County, shall the North County Fire Protection District be authorized to levy a special tax at a flat rate of \$5/month (\$60/year) per parcel of property owned, to be used for construction, capital improvements and deferred maintenance of fire stations, raising approximately \$1 million per year, with an initial appropriations limit of \$20 million, and independent annual audits and citizen oversight required?

