# Frequently Asked Questions

What is the history of the fire service that led to the creation of a new plan?

After the Hanley Fire in 1964, many communities in Sonoma County opted to establish their own Volunteer Fire Companies (VFCs) or Special Districts. That more provincial development of the fire service system resulted in the independent creation of what is now 39 fire agencies without objective or County-wide analysis of the placement, needs or long term viability of departments at the forefront of the decision making. Shifting demographics and economic realities in the County have made the support for that many districts unsustainable.

**Why did the County request a new fire service plan?**

Recognizing the legacy of erratic attention to and support for fire service agencies in the County, and out of frustration with the individual requests for support and an inability to assess where County funds would make the greatest impact, the Board of Supervisors asked Fire Service professionals to come together and provide a comprehensive plan for fire service delivery in the County that is efficient, effective and sustainable.

Who created the plan?

Fire department representatives (Chiefs and Board members) from each of the existing Fire Service Regions comprised a Board of Supervisors created Fire Services Advisory Council, working for almost two years, to create the plan. This effort was the first time in 40 years that fire service agencies came together and worked collaboratively, toward a collective solution, to elevate fire service delivery in the County.

**What is the goal of the plan?**

The overarching aim of the plan development process was to take a County-wide look at service levels and determine what would both optimize the ability to provide effective response to emergencies and ensure efficiencies both in operations and administration of fire services. The plan lays the groundwork for the ability to consolidate agencies and ensure a more coherent, streamlined and reliable fire service delivery system. The goals of the plan, therefore, are:

A **collective solution** – moving beyond addressing individual department issues  
A **self-reliant system** – minimizing County dependency on mutual aid  
Citizen **service levels at the forefront** – every investment increases the quality, reliability and effectiveness of the people and equipment involved in first response
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Optimization of *use of resources* – taking a County-wide look at how to best position and deploy people and equipment  
*Standardization* – harmonizing training, equipment and protocols strengthens the capacity for first responders to come together effectively on an incident  
Sustainable source of *long term funding* – eliminating the need for bake sales and bbqs to keep operations afloat  

**How will the plan achieve the goal?**

While the plan provides funding for increased staffing, stations and equipment, it is changing how we manage and administer fire services in the County, not just what we have available to fight fires with. The unsustainable nature of existing fire services – 39 departments, volunteer agencies facing dwindling availability of volunteers and unreliable funding streams – demanded a collective solution that elevates each department’s ability to provide effective response services to citizens and then lays the foundation for consolidation of departments.

**What is the status of the plan?**

After almost two years of discussion, consultation and deliberation, the Fire Services Advisory Council approved the plan, and the County Board of Supervisors adopted the plan in August 2018. With the plan’s adoption, the County formed a new Ad Hoc committee of the Board (Supervisors Hopkins and Rabbitt) for Plan Implementation and called for the creation of a Fire Chiefs’ Strategy Leadership Group (SLG) to carry forward with the next steps in laying the foundation for the Plan’s implementation. The SLG is meeting regularly and working with all stakeholders to ensure the County’s mandate for investment of existing fire service funding is allocated by the end of 2018 and the pursuit of a half cent sales tax measure is going forward to ensure funding for plan implementation.

**Who are the members of the Strategy Leadership Group (SLG)?**

Elected by the Sonoma County Fire Chiefs’ Association, the SLG is a representative group of Fire Chiefs to ensure the entire County’s fire service interests are considered going forward. The members of the SLG and their respective representations are:

- Chief Tony Gossner, Santa Rosa Fire, Cities Representative  
- Chief Mike Mickelson, Wilmar FD, Volunteer Fire Companies’ Association  
- Chief Steve Akre, Sonoma Valley Fire, EMS Representative  
- Chief Dan George, Gold Ridge FD, Fire Districts’ Association  
- Chief Mark Heine, Windsor Rincon FD, State Chiefs’ Association  
- Chief Todd Derum, CALFIRE Sonoma County, Sonoma County Chiefs’ Association  
- Chief Dave Franceschi, Forestville FD, West County Representative

**What is the County doing with its fire service?**

The County has a poor track record with its support for Volunteer Fire Companies (VFCs). The County will get out of the business of supporting the VFCs and instead, invest funds in the VFCs to enable them to be viable partners for other departments when future consolidations are possible.

**What are the priorities right now for moving forward with the plan?**
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The Board of Supervisors set aside $2.5M annually to support county-wide services. With that money we are providing funds to departments that are vulnerable to decreases in service capability to keep them viable during the transition. In addition, an apparatus replacement program is in development that will enable a near term provision of some equipment and we are mapping the needs across the County to be ready for further funding availability. Lastly, but of highest priority, funds are being allocated to ensure VFC strength to ready them for future consolidations.

What happens to my local fire department under the plan?
The Plan does not close any stations. Station identities will remain the same, as can the community’s relationships with them. Stations will have structural improvements to make them safer and more accessible. Future funding will provide for newer, safer, more reliable engines, increased staffing in many cases and cost effectiveness from being administratively managed through a more streamlined consolidation structure.

Why not continue to rely on volunteer fire fighters?
Multiple factors have conspired to make reliance on volunteer response no longer a sustainable business model for the fire service. At its inception, the volunteer fire fighter could serve with minimal impact on their routine commitments nor did it demand significant time and effort to be qualified to serve. All that has changed. In addition, the eagerness to volunteer has historically come from a strong attachment to place, with many multi-generational families providing the volunteer pool over decades. This County is more populated now by people with less available time to devote to training and qualification and the increase in part time home ownership combined with the aging of the volunteer pool make this no longer a viable staffing resource.

What staffing improvements does the Plan provide?
The Plan results in the creation of 177 new full time jobs, a 44% increase in firefighters in the County - full time, reliable, fully trained and qualified and hopefully, residents of our local communities as well.

We use Mutual Aid to provide a strong response, why not continue with that?
Our vulnerability lies in the dependence upon mutual aid and CALFIRE to compensate for our insufficient resources in staff, equipment and capability. The Plan establishes a self reliant system within the County.

Where will funding come from to pay for this plan?
The County is pursuing a half cent sales tax to generate the approximately $42 Million needed to initiate and sustain the plan’s aims.

Why do we need to spend more money on fire when we already pay taxes for it?
The truth is, the County has been getting by on the cheap for a long time. And, very little of your property tax dollars go to fire departments - the highest allocation in the County is only 18 cents on the dollar. The County didn't have a clear picture of the funding required for fire services because departments are resilient and come up with pancake breakfasts and bbqs to fill the gaps in their funding. Incremental tax measures over time provided an immediate infusion of resources to forestall an expected stopgap in funding but have been insufficient.
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for the long term and fluctuating needs. The plan provides a permanent and sufficient resource of funds to enable a sustainable system of service.

PLEASE SUBMIT ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS TO ADDRESS TO: fireserviceslg@gmail.com

Thank you!