

Santa Rosa Junior College Fire Program White Paper

By

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In a high-risk occupation such as firefighting, training has been a priority for California for many years. Originating in the early 1950s with the State Office of Education, training responsibilities were transferred to State Fire Training (SFT) in the 1970s and under their guidance, two comprehensive programs known as the California Fire Service Training and Education System (CFSTES) and Fire Service Training and Education Program (FSTEP) were developed. As one of the first formal fire training programs in the country, it quickly became recognized as a model throughout the county. The primary vehicle for the delivery of a majority of these courses have been SFT accredited Community College fire programs known as Accredited Regional Training Programs (ARTP's), offering "pre-service" Fire Academies, Associate Degrees and "In-Service" training. These were later expanded to include accredited fire departments (known as ALAs) and the California Firefighter Joint Apprenticeship Committee (CAL-JAC) that partnered with SFT to provide in-service training for employed professional firefighters.

While the ARTP based system has successfully supplied an adequate pool of trained personnel for decades, two trends have emerged that present an enormous challenge to this model; the impact of climate change and the implementation of a certification test process by SFT. As the only ARTP in the coastal region between San Francisco and the Oregon border, this paper will address the ability of the Santa Rosa Accredited Regional Training Program (SRARTP) to meet the fire training needs of the region.

BACKGROUND

As any resident of California has witnessed in recent years, climate change has increased the severity of wildland fires, greatly impacting the fire service and its staffing levels. On the average, fire seasons are 84 days longer than they were forty years ago and a decades long policy to quickly extinguish fires has led to an excessive growth (or "loading") of fuel in the wildlands compounding this problem. Subsequently when wildfires do occur, they burn more intensely and on the average, twice the acreage they did in the 1990s with records illustrating that 10 of the most destructive fires in State history have occurred since 2003, and six of those since 2017.

This "new abnormal" as described by former Governor Brown has placed an enormous strain on the California fire service, which is beginning to be acknowledged by policy makers. While Gov. Newsom's 2019 CALFIRE budget proposal has included an addition \$40 million to hire 131 more firefighters and purchase 13 engines, CALFIRE's Training Chief has indicated a more realistic figure is up to 1,000 firefighters. They have also requested an increase of \$95 million including funds for health and wellness programs as staffing shortages have led to firefighters routinely being deployed 45 to 60 days.

In an area that in 2017 suffered some of the most devastating fires in State history, the Kincadee fire this fall and has been among the first to send fire resources to five of the other ten worst conflagrations in California history, the strain has been particularly acute for north-bay fire agencies. This has led to requests for additional staffing and funding. Notwithstanding those requested by CALFIRE, a survey of twenty of the larger departments in

the area revealed plans to hire 132 firefighters over the next two years. In addition, seven local tax measures to expand staffing have been approved since 2017 and the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors (BOS) have placed on the March 2020 ballot a ½-cent sales tax measure to raise an estimated \$42 million for fire protection and hire up to 177 firefighters.

These trends have already impacted the enrollment of the SRARTP fire program's Firefighter I (FFI) and Wildland academies which have been at capacity for two years with wait lists of approx. 75 students. This data is supported by placement figures provided by the Chancellor's Office, which show over 91% of our academy graduates are currently employed in the fire service.

The second trend affecting the SRARTP have been SFT's efforts to align its program to meet national standards. Initiated in 2010, this process culminated with SFT's accreditation by the International Fire Service Accreditation Congress (IFSAC) and the Pro Board Fire Service Professional Qualifications System (Pro Board) in 2014. The result was an expansion of the number of hours required for FFI academies and a mandate to conduct certification testing for all students. This had an adverse impact on our program by reducing our academy offerings by a third (due to the increase in academy hours) and creating an unfunded mandate to purchase additional equipment and props necessary to deliver the required instruction and testing.

In addition to FFI, the number of tests and training academies we will be required to deliver will grow over time as SFT IFSAC/Pro-Board accreditation expands to include other certification tracks such as Firefighter II, Fire Inspector, Apparatus Operator and Company Fire Officer (partial list). As the only entity between San Francisco and the Oregon border that can perform testing for these tracks and ensure the regions fire agencies have qualified candidates and the certifications required to perform their jobs, these changes will place an enormous burden on the SRARTP. If not provided the resources to deliver these services, the outcome could result in staffing shortages resulting in local agencies having to send their staff to other areas of the State to receive this training and testing. And since most certifications have prerequisites (I.E. FFI certification is required for Firefighter II - FII), the demand for these services will be compounded and has already been felt with local fire agencies requesting FFII testing. Ironically, if we fail to provide this service, we violate SFT policies and risk losing our accreditation, which will only worsen this problem. It has been estimated that in order to meet this demand, we will need to increase our course offerings 30% and purchase a number of additional instructional aids.

While the SRARTP has examined ways to increase our course offerings, its ability has been limited by a lack of facilities, which will only become more acute as accreditation and testing for the other SFT certification tracks are implemented. In a needs survey conducted of fire agencies in the SRARTP's service area (Sonoma, Marin, Napa and Lake Counties), it was found the need for FFII testing alone was 100% greater than that of FFI. Given the inability to meet the current demand for FFI and Wildland personnel, this will compound the challenges facing fire agencies to hire qualified individuals.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In order to provide an adequate pool of trained firefighters *and* meet the testing needs of the region's fire agencies, two long standing problems will need to be addressed; expanding the fire training facilities at the Public Safety Training Center (PSTC) and increasing the fire program staffing levels including creating new job classifications and enhancing compensation levels for staff.

GOAL ONE: Expand the Existing Training Facility

Given the PSTC's footprint no longer has the capacity to increase fire enrollment, the most viable option is to obtain additional real estate to establish an area dedicated exclusively to fire training and relocate or erect the required props. Currently, the District has an opportunity to purchase up to 10 acres of an adjacent parcel that would fully satisfy the space required by the program. The second phase would involve re-locating the programs existing props to the new parcel and constructing the following:

- I. Fire Training Tower:** Currently the PSTC has a three-story fire tower with an attached burn room that is used extensively in the FFI and Volunteer academies. However, because of the poor location of the tower to adjacent property lines, buildings and traffic routes, we cannot perform many of the evolutions found in our curriculum. In addition, due to its placement adjacent to the Emergency Vehicle Operations Course (EVOC), training activities must often be rescheduled or cancelled due to conflicts with their training. As the demand for additional classes increase its use, this situation will only worsen. The solution would be to either dismantle the existing tower and burn room and reassemble on the new parcel or construct a new one with the same features.
- II. Hose Evolution Training Area:** Currently, almost all hose evolutions are performed on the EVOC course which creates two problems. The first is it results in the same scheduling conflicts and cancellations experienced with the training tower activities. Because hose evolutions can be found in the curriculum of almost every fire skills based class, our inability to include them makes it difficult to meet many course objectives and Student Learning Outcomes (SLO's) which undermines the credibility of our program. It also jeopardizes our Accreditation by failing to follow the curriculum we are charged with delivering.

The second is the enormous quantities of water that are used for fire training and the unsustainable nature of this practice given climate change and the long term drought trends California is facing. Based on meter readings, water use for each semester varies between 400,000 and 700,000 gallons, which will only increase as we are required to deliver testing other courses. In addition, if the State repeats its directive for water purveyors to implement conservation measures, it would prevent us from meeting curriculum requirements, further jeopardizing our accreditation as an ARTP.

A solution to this problem is to follow the lead of the other community colleges who have constructed a hose evolution training area that reclaims water into a tank system that is then re-used through hydrants that draw from the tanks. Such a system would allow us to continue training uninterrupted and could also serve as a revenue source from other fire agencies as a training venue during drought years. It would also help us meet the sustainability Initiative adopted by the Board of Trustees of working to forward projects that minimize the District's impact on the environment. Given the District's structural deficit and the \$700-\$1000 it pays for water each billing period, the project will ultimately amortize itself and save money over the long term. The merits of this were apparent enough, that at the District's 2018 Sustainability Summit, it was identified as a priority in the committee's 2019-2022 planning document (*Green Print*).

- III. Establish a Live Fire Area:** Since SFT has required live fire training be included in the curriculum for FFI and FFII, the program has been fortunate enough to obtain grant funding to purchase two Draeger props that have allowed us to meet these requirements. However, they have not come without some unintended consequences. Due to our site constraints and their proximity to the range, scenario village and classrooms,

it has resulted in a series of air quality complaints which included a response from the Bay Area Air Quality Management District (BAAQMD). While they have determined we are in compliance, it is our responsibility to do everything within our power to minimize the health impacts to our students, staff and neighbors and the most effective solution is to re-locate the props to an isolated location. The adjacent parcel would also serve as the ideal area to relocate the other burn props used by the program including the car fire, flammable liquids, fire extinguisher and compressed gas cylinder props.

IV. Build a Central Training Building: Key to delivering instruction is constructing a training center building that contains the same features as a municipal fire station. This would include a large classroom for instruction, an apparatus bay large enough to hold four fire apparatus, sleeping quarters large enough to accommodate a FFI class and instructors for the academy overnight sessions, a kitchen, locker rooms and showers, an air room for a compressor and SCBA bottle storage and filling, a room to store the student's turn-outs and other PPE with facilities to wash soiled gear, as well as a large storeroom and separate shop area to permit equipment repairs. Having a setting that replicates the working environment the students are being prepared for would also serve to enhance their learning experience.

V. Parade Ground, Bleachers and Shade Structure: To provide the room needed to conduct line-up, formation, drills and inspections, a parade ground would be an integral part of the training center. To facilitate outside instruction and meet the provisions of a Heat Illness Plan as found in Title 8, bleachers complete with a shade structure would be an essential component.

GOAL TWO: Increase Staffing to Levels Comparable with Other Accredited Academies

Maintaining a core group of staff is essential to managing and meeting the needs of the program and is one of the factors used by SFT in the accreditation process. After reviewing their criteria, researching a score of other accredited programs and experiencing the struggles the SRARTP has endured over the last decade, it is apparent our current staffing levels are inadequate. Unless they are augmented and the compensation levels adjusted to reflect the unique and specific qualifications required by SFT, the SRARTP will continue to struggle and may find it unable to deliver those programs that meet the needs of the region's fire agencies. These include:

I. Fire Academy Coordinator: To provide the management and oversight necessary to operate an accredited academy, it is essential to have a classified position as a designated coordinator who possesses both a strong background in fire training and a working knowledge of SFT policies and procedures. Because of the conflicts inherent to the academy schedule and fire season, the position is best suited for a retiree who will not be recalled to work. Since most who fall into this category are PERS retirees, it should ideally not be a PERS position to avoid conflicts with any retirement benefit they may receive. In addition, to be compensated at a level commensurate with its responsibilities, the pay scale for the position should be adjusted to that closer to an Adjunct Instructor or Lab Assistant rather than the current Professional Expert rate received.

II. Skills Evaluator: With SFT's recent creation of the *Lead Skills Evaluator* and *Skills Evaluator* positions to conduct testing for the FFI Academy and other SFT certification tracks, it has become necessary for SRARTP staff to upgrade their training in order to meet the minimum qualifications (MQ's) for the position. While we have been fortunate to have enough staff attend the 56 hours of training required for these positions, because District policies only allow them to be paid at the *Professional Expert* pay rate, there is widespread

sentiment amongst staff that they are not fairly compensated. This is only reinforced by the MQ's established by SFT which are closer to those required of an Adjunct Instructor. This has made it difficult to recruit staff to participate as evaluators during the testing process and almost led to the cancelation of several tests due to a lack of staff. This would be devastating to our program and would lead to the loss of our accreditation. A relatively simple solution would be to create a *Skills Evaluator* position that like the *Academy Coordinator's*, has a pay rate also commensurate with its MQ's and responsibilities.

III. Academy Materials Handlers: Given the delivery of a fire program is a resource heavy endeavor requiring a wide range of working props and equipment, it is critical to have staff who have the skills to perform maintenance and conduct any necessary repairs. This has become particularly important since SFT's IFSAC Pro-Board accreditation has increased the number of props required and subsequently increased our workload. Because few staff have been willing to work in this capacity at the *Professional Expert* rate, much of the work has been performed by the Program Director and Academy Coordinator which clearly represents an unsustainable model. In order to avoid disruptions to instruction and ensure props are operable when scheduled, a P/T Materials Handler position is a necessity. And as proposed above, a pay adjustment or new classification is warranted so as to provide compensation that will attract and retain someone to the position. It would also be beneficial to avoid the position being a member of PERS in order to discourage PERS retirees from applying and greatly increase the number of interested candidates.

SUMMARY

Even to a member of the general-public with little or no knowledge of the operational and training needs of the fire service, any County resident will understand that the challenges facing firefighters, far exceed those of yesterday. As described above, this situation is exacerbated by several other factors including:

- SFT's IFSAC and Pro-Board accreditation, which has lengthened the academy, increased the number of props and equipment required and mandated an extensive testing process.
- Future SFT testing mandates for FFII, Company Officer and other certification tracks that will create additional responsibilities and burdens on the SRARTP.
- A significant increase in the demand for our programs including the FFI, Wildland and Volunteer Academies, due in part to the interest created by the prevalence of frequent conflagrations, enhanced staffing patterns adopted by many fire agencies and tax measures which have also increased staffing.
- The lack of real estate available to perform the *existing* training we are required to deliver and the conflict experienced with other Public Safety programs for the use of the limited PSTC facilities.
- A growing reality that as climate change worsens drought conditions, we face the prospect of losing the ability to flow water for training purposes. Without the benefit of a training area that reclaims the water (as exists at other community college fire programs), this would result in our inability to meet the curriculum requirements of our academies and risk losing our accreditation.

While this creates significant challenges for the SRARTP, with the solutions proposed above it is this author's opinion they can be overcome if a commitment is made by the Fire Program's Advisory Committee, Sonoma County Fire Chiefs, Fire Labor groups and the District's Board of Trustees to support them. It should also be reinforced that the District currently has a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to obtain a 10 acre parcel immediately adjacent to the PSTC by the current property owner who has expressed a strong desire to sell it to SRJC for public safety training purposes. Acquisition of this parcel would provide the real estate needed to allow for the facilities described above and eliminate the conflict that exists with the other PSTC programs.

