

Date: March 20, 2024

From: Fifth District Representative, Santa Cruz County Fire Department Advisory Commission

RE: Attachment to March 20, 2024, FDAC meeting minutes

Subject: These comments are with respect to the following agenda item (included as an image from the published agenda and also as text) in which the FDAC was characterized as “ineffective”. I have talked with my Supervisor’s office and they encouraged me to speak up and be candid regarding the matter of the future of the FDAC. These comments are based on my experiences and opinions as the Fifth District Rep. to the FDAC over 16 years.

E. Future of FDAC – This Commission is being reviewed by the BoS. In the Jan BoS meeting, the following was on the agenda – “In the 2023 Long-Range Master Plan, the Santa Cruz County Fire Department identified the role of the [Fire Department Advisory Commission \(FDAC\)](#) as not fully utilized and/or understood and **the work of the commission as ineffective. Commission members acknowledge the FDAC needs to change. Staff will work on what this looks like and return with a recommendation.”**

E. Future of FDAC – This Commission is being reviewed by the BoS. In the Jan BoS meeting, the following was on the agenda – “In the 2023 Long-Range Master Plan, the Santa Cruz County Fire Department identified the role of the Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC) as not fully utilized and/or understood and the work of the commission as ineffective. Commission members acknowledge the FDAC needs to change. Staff will work on what this looks like and return with a recommendation.”

Note: The above agenda item was not authored by an FDAC member. It was included in the Board of Supervisors Agenda Packet materials for their Jan. 30, 2024, meeting.

Summary: The characterization of the FDAC as “ineffective” implies that it is the FDAC that is responsible for its being ineffective. This is a gross mischaracterization and an insult to those of us on the FDAC who have spent countless hours working to keep SCCFD viable and made countless good faith attempts to work with all parties. If the FDAC is ineffective, it is because it has not been consulted constructively by County Fire and Cal Fire.

Background: it is crucial to note that **the FDAC was extremely effective** in leading the 2019-2020 Prop. 218 ballot measure that currently generates roughly \$1.4M annually for County Fire. The impetus to move forward with this effort was suggested by FDAC members for many years and eventually culminated in garnering sufficient Board of Supervisors support to place the measure on a ballot. The bulk of the money goes to hiring approximately sixteen (16) Cal Fire firefighters (moving from 2/0 to a minimum of 3/0 engine staffing as per the dictate of the State Fire Marshall) to keep our five state stations (one in each Supervisory district) open 24/7 during the non-fire season. Although this was necessary to maintain the current level of service, it is important to note that **Cal Fire and the current County Fire Administration (which is also Cal Fire) directly benefitted from this effort by gaining jobs for their employees, as well as a larger workforce to command**. Consequently, they were highly motivated to cooperate fully with the FDAC leadership and with all five County Supervisors and Staff to make this effort successful.

The Big Question: Given this overwhelming success, why then is the FDAC now characterized as “ineffective”? The answer is simple: to be effective, the goals of all parties must be aligned. Only when they are aligned as in the above example, can the outcome be considered successful by all parties, i.e., a win-win-win scenario for the three major stakeholders: the County, Cal Fire (who also comprise County Fire Administration), and the FDAC who represent our Volunteer firefighters and the public.

In the stakeholder interviews conducted by A.P Triton for their Master Plan related work, members of the FDAC clearly expressed their frustrations in attempting to collaborate with the County Fire administration. On many occasions, practical suggestions were made that could have improved various aspects of SCCFD. These were either ignored, delayed, or dismissed summarily with various excuses.

Collaboration Failure: The following account of a major expense proposal exemplifies the obstacles faced by the FDAC when attempting to collaborate with County Fire Cal Fire administrators: approximately 2-3 years ago, members of the FDAC, at that time sympathetic to Cal Fire’s plaint that they lacked bandwidth to effectively service the Volunteers, suggested that a “Volunteer BC” position be staffed **with the express intent to directly manage, motivate, recruit, retain, and mentor our Volunteers**. SCCFD’s Cal Fire administrators were quick to agree this was a great idea. The FDAC members requested more than once that they be involved in defining the roles and responsibilities for this new BC. These requests were ignored.

At last, the FDAC was informed that candidates were being interviewed for this position. Again, FDAC members requested that they collaborate with the County Fire administration, who are also Cal Fire employees, to define roles and responsibilities. The answer this time, was a resounding **“NO!”**, paraphrased as “This is an internal operational matter. The new BC will be a Cal Fire employee and therefore neither the County nor the FDAC have any say on what he or she will do [even though the County is effectively paying for this person].” Without any further dialogue with FDAC, the proposed “Volunteer BC” was subsequently hired by Cal Fire for County Fire.

Months have passed and once again, our County Fire Cal Fire administration is complaining in the Triton report in Recommendation A-2 that “the current management team lacks the bandwidth to effectively implement, or manage additional personnel, projects, programs, or service delivery enhancements.” The recommendation goes on to recommend hiring a Deputy Chief (more expensive than a BC), notwithstanding that during our original discussion there was only enough funding for a Battalion Chief (BC), who was hired. And... recommendation A-3 carries this even further, suggesting that a Division Chief (more expensive than a Deputy Chief) be hired!

No mention is made that a Volunteer BC was hired several months ago to do this job, or that no responsibilities, goals, or measurable objectives were ever defined for this position. Presumably, these are all operational in nature and hence off limits to the FDAC. This begs the question **“How can the FDAC do its job without operational visibility, or at a minimum some key metrics that demonstrate the effective use of County Fire funds and resources, especially when more and more are being requested?”**

Without visible direction for the existing Volunteer BC, it should be no surprise that our County Fire Administration continues to suffer a “lack of bandwidth” to focus on the County Fire Volunteer needs that were the prime motivating factors when the FDAC proposed this position. This situation

persists in large part owing to the lack of any metrics or mechanism to measure County Fire Administration's performance or hold them accountable. This is supported by the Triton Master Plan report finding under the Management Components section that "Management goals and objectives have not been documented and are not clearly expressed."

Operational = Off Limits: The above account illustrates how FDAC efforts are rendered ineffective when County Fire administration negatively impacts our ability to monitor, measure and advise by classifying such efforts as operational matters, even when these can be constructive and helpful. The irony here is that the FDAC is rendered ineffective by our very own County Fire administration.

The Future – Making the Master Plan Operational

The crux of the matter appears to be under what conditions the purview of the FDAC may extend to operational issues. This is important because **the Board of Supervisors depends on its commissions to function as its "eyes and ears"** to provide in-depth information and dialogue so that they may make informed decisions. To clarify and reinforce this key point, consider Section 2.120.050 of Santa Cruz County Code in which the powers and duties of the FDAC are officially set forth:

2.120.050 Powers and Duties.

*The Commission shall make efforts to ensure that the interests of the County Fire Department, career and volunteer fire companies and the citizens residing within County Fire Department jurisdiction are protected and promoted by **monitoring, studying, and advising** the County Fire Chief and the Board of Supervisors on:*

- (A) The preparation and implementation of **the County Fire Department master plan;***
- (B) How the County's fire protection, rescue, and emergency medical services program **can be improved and made more cost effective;***
- (C) **The budget priorities** of the County Fire Department, **along with specific recommendations;***
- (D) The **changing role or mission** of **each of the volunteer fire companies**, and the resulting changes in their requirements;*
- (E) **Such other matters relating to the County's fire protection, rescue, and emergency medical services program as the committee desires to bring to the attention of the Fire Chief and Board of Supervisors.** [Ord. 5279 § 19, 2018; Ord. 4455 § 1, 1997].*

The FDAC must have both access to operational detail and collaboration at the operational level to fulfill its responsibilities and exercise its Powers and Duties. Without this, effective oversight of Santa Cruz County Fire is extremely difficult or impossible to achieve. Taking each of the above in more detail explains why this is an essential requirement for the FDAC to be effective:

*(A) The preparation and implementation of **the County Fire Department master plan;***

The current Master Plan report by A.P. Triton is incomplete as noted in the FDAC letter to the Board of Supervisors from the January, 2024, meeting. Specifically missing are goals and objectives, and measurements. Precedent as set by all previous master plans, includes detailed goals and objectives. FDAC members in prior years have always collaborated with County Fire administration in clarifying, prioritizing, and reviewing these objectives – many of which are clearly operational in nature. Thus, to fulfill its responsibility with respect to the master plan, the FDAC must have access and collaboration at the operational level.

(B) *How the County's fire protection, rescue, and emergency medical services program can be improved and made more cost effective;*

Improvements and cost effectiveness are by their very nature operational as that is where the real effects can be felt, observed, and measured.

(C) *The budget priorities of the County Fire Department, along with specific recommendations;*

These are not "general" recommendations. They are explicitly "specific", and that readily translates to "operational".

(D) *The changing role or mission of each of the volunteer fire companies, and the resulting changes in their requirements;*

Each volunteer fire company is unique. Their terrain, demographics, and composition of their Volunteer companies differ, and there may be other factors as well. While the overall mission of SCCFD may be the same at a high level (life, property, environment), that of each company may need to vary in accordance with specific requirements they have. Again, these must be predicated upon or informed by operational needs.

(E) *Such other matters relating to the County's fire protection, rescue, and emergency medical services program as the committee desires to bring to the attention of the Fire Chief and Board of Supervisors.* [Ord. 5279 § 19, 2018; Ord. 4455 § 1, 1997].

The phrase "such other matters" effectively extends the purview of the FDAC to anything it "desires" to explore in the course of fulfilling its responsibility to "ensure that the interests of the County Fire Department, career and volunteer fire companies and the citizens residing within County Fire Department jurisdiction are protected and promoted by **monitoring, studying, and advising** the County Fire Chief and the Board of Supervisors on": [(A) through (E)] above.

Thus, once again, this must extend to operational matters.

CONCLUSION and RECOMMENDED ACTION: Based on the foregoing, I recommend for the benefit of all parties that the Board of Supervisors explicitly direct the Santa Cruz County Fire Department Administration (Cal Fire and County Fire) to provide full access to all related materials and engage in discussion when requested without undue delay and to work collaboratively with the FDAC on any and all matters the FDAC or its members desire to address, even if such matters are considered operational in nature, in order to fulfill its responsibilities per its Powers and Duties as given in Section 2.120.050 of the Santa Cruz County Code.

Respectfully submitted,

Arnie Wernick,

Fifth District Representative, Santa Cruz County Fire Department Advisory Commission