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Five Cities Fire Authority officially formed

By Mike Hodgson/Associate Editor



Firefighters and officials from area departments pledge their allegiance to the newly formed Five Cities Fire Authority.
//Len Wood/Staff

Many people consider last Friday's first meeting of the Five Cities Fire Authority a historic event for the South County.

Arroyo Grande, Grover Beach and Oceano officially combined their three fire departments into one at the meeting where 17 full-time and 25 reserve personnel were sworn in.

Grover Beach Mayor John Shoals was chosen chairman of the Fire Authority governing board, with Arroyo Grande Councilman Joe Costello chosen vice chairman of the board that includes Oceano Community Services District Director Jim Hill.

Board members also selected 3 p.m. on the third Friday of every month to hold meetings in the Grover Beach City Council Chambers.

A brief recess allowed the 60 or so people who attended the meeting to celebrate with a cake intricately decorated with the new agency's logo and a border of flames.

Then the board approved agreements for risk insurance, fleet maintenance and personnel, legal, financial and information technology services and a first-year operating budget of nearly \$3.36 million.

Although ideas for consolidating various South County agencies — even entire cities — had been floated for decades, fire services consolidation really got moving with a 2004 study that recommended combining the Oceano, Grover Beach, Arroyo Grande and Pismo Beach fire departments.

However, Pismo Beach had already contracted with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection — now Cal Fire — to provide the city's fire protection and opted to continue that contract.

Grover Beach and Arroyo Grande pressed forward with a joint fire services agreement, and in 2006, a fire oversight committee was formed to guide a gradual process consolidation.

In 2007, Oceano signed on, and in 2008, all three jurisdictions agreed to move toward full consolidation.

Friday's meeting marked the culmination of that long journey toward improving fire protection services while eventually cutting costs for all three jurisdictions.

But it also marked the start of a new process of hammering out little details that keep popping up like springtime weeds.

“It’s creating a whole new fire organization because we’re trying to meld three different agencies into one with a new brand, new badges, new patches,” said Mike Hubert, chief of the combined department.

“Every time I turn around it’s something else, from (ordering) business cards to linking all the computers and telephones and figuring out where package (deliveries) go,” he continued.

“The staff is just inundated with work right now,” he added. “But we’re getting there. We knew it would be like this at first.”

Some changes are on hold because they hinge on other conditions that have to be resolved.

For example, Hubert noted every fire agency is issued a three-digit designator that’s used when units are sent assist other agencies, often statewide.

Arroyo Grande is AYG, Grover Beach is GBO and Oceano is OCE. The new Fire Authority’s designation will be FIV, and all the vehicle IDs will have to be changed to reflect that identifier.

Because three fleets are being combined, the units’ numerical designations also must be changed.

But changing the letter codes and vehicle numbers is complicated by the fact that two dispatch centers exist.

Grover Beach and Oceano units are dispatched by Grover Beach’s center, and Arroyo Grande units are dispatched by Arroyo Grande’s center.

That situation could have been resolved if Arroyo Grande voters had approved the bond measure to build a new Police Station, which would have included a large, state-of-the-art dispatch center.

Since the bond measure failed, the two cities have asked San Luis Obispo to submit a proposal for providing dispatch services from that city’s recently expanded center.

“We can’t use the new engine numbers until we land in one place,” Hubert said. “In the meantime, we’re still GBO and AYG until we figure that out.”

Along with that comes a number that’s used when reporting incidents to the state, which then forwards the reports to the federal government. That allows incidents to be tracked by number, Hubert said.

“How do we consecutively number incidents between two dispatch centers?” he said. “We have to develop a whole new process for reporting.”

Despite the growing pains Hubert expects the Fire Authority to experience for a while, he believes the results will be worth it.

“It’s taken a lot of political courage and hard work to get where we are,” he said. “I really think the people of the Five Cities will benefit from it.”