

Lake Valley may absorb South Lake Tahoe Fire Department

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe residents may no longer have a fire department to call their own. That is because talks are under way for the city department to be run by Lake Valley Fire Protection District.

Lake Valley, which is overseen by a five-member board, voted this month to proceed with a consolidation feasibility study of the two fire departments. South Lake Tahoe City Council members are slated to vote March 20 to go forward with the same study.



Lake Tahoe News furnished a slew of questions to both entities. Both agencies said they would not answer those questions until the council votes Tuesday and/or until the study progresses.

“We are probably looking at least a four- to six-month process to study the pros and cons of this,” City Manager Tony O’Rourke said.

Financial issues

Lake Valley has three sources of revenue – property taxes, developer fees and Measure M. The latter is a June 1986 voter approved tax that charges property owners \$10 or \$20 per year depending on whether a structure is on the parcel.

If the merger goes through, it is unknown how the new LVFPD would be funded, or how the discrepancy of some members of the service district being taxed and others not being taxed would

be rectified.

Property taxes are the department's primary source of income.

City residents don't have a separate fire tax or fee. The fire department's annual budget is \$5.7 million, according to the city's website. This comes out of the general fund, which gets its dollars primarily from property, sales and hotel taxes.

Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris in a letter dated March 8 to the City Council proposes the city use property tax dollars to fund its share of fire services for its residents to the tune of \$6.526 million.

What the additional \$800,000 the city would pay for compared to what is in this year's budget is unknown because Lake Valley and the city are not answering questions. Nor is it known what other services might be cut by the city to make up this difference.

The city, though, is saving money this fiscal year by having the police chief take on the roll of fire chief, too. The council also eliminated the three battalion chief positions and is contracting with Lake Valley for fire marshal services.

Harris in his letter says he came up with the figure by taking 16.7 percent of 1 percent of the 2011-12 assessed tax roll of city properties that total \$3,903,077,660.

Harris' budget outline in his letter says to cover the city's fire expenses it would take \$6,999,5000.

What isn't known is if the city were to pay \$6.526 million as Harris suggests, if county residents are then subsidizing city fire costs to the tune of nearly a half million dollars.

Some particulars

O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News*, "We are looking also at different spectrums from contracting to a JPA to a full

consolidation. We are going to look at it from multiple angles.”

However, the letter from Harris, which is included in the city’s fire consolidation staff report, has some specific details about how his department would be taking over the city department. He goes so far as to detail how the city would need to pay one-time startup costs of \$787,000 that would pay for new uniforms for city firefighters, stationery, station signage and vehicle insignias.

The bulk of that figure – \$534,000 – would be to buy out city employees’ sick, comp and vacation time.

In that total figure is \$5,000 for public relations; what that entails is a mystery as well.

It is also not known where that one-time fee would come from.

Equipment upgrades are part of what’s being talked about.

Harris’ letter states, “This proposal also includes the replacement of two of the city’s first out fire engines and the ladder truck. This will be accomplished by a financed lease/purchase of the apparatus. In addition, both Station 3 and Station 2 will be remodeled and updated to accommodate the new ladder truck and meet current fire station design codes and requirements.”

The board of directors, according to Harris’ letter, would remain intact, with “residents of South Lake Tahoe ... eligible to run for a seat on the board of directors at the next fire district election just like any other resident in the unincorporated county area.”

According to a clearly not updated Lake Valley fire website, the board of directors and their terms are:

- Dave Huber, Dec. 1, 2006-Dec. 3, 2010

- Robert Bettencourt, Dec. 5, 2008-Dec. 7-2012
- Gregory Herback, Dec. 5-2008-Dec. 3, 2010
- Robert Rossi, June 10, 2010-Dec. 3, 2010
- Ryan Wagoner, Dec. 5-2008-Dec. 7, 2012.

A little history

Lake Valley fire has been in existence since 1947. Most people think of it as the area serving Meyers. It covers approximately 83 square miles.

South Lake Tahoe's department was formed in 1965 when the city was incorporated.

"They actually wanted to be part of the city. They were in the city boundaries at the time," Laurel Ames said of the firefighters.

Ames was one of six members on the city's incorporation committee. (The others were Wink Ames, Tom and Betty Mitchell, and Vaughn and Mary Burlingham.)

"When we incorporated we were controlled by very strict state incorporation laws," Ames told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The only real leeway was with the boundaries. With no money to pay a surveyor, known landmarks were used. But it took court action (Ames v. County of El Dorado) and precedent setting law to figure out how to count landowners.

Ames said the ruling came out in their favor which said whoever was legally allowed to sign for all the other members became in name the landowner of the lot for incorporation purposes.

Another person involved with the early years of South Lake Tahoe said a reason to incorporate was to "control our own destiny". Incorporation was tried three times – though not all

came to a vote – before it was approved.

Now the destiny may change without the voters having a say.

That's another of those unanswered questions – if the voters of either jurisdiction would have a say in the fire department consolidations or if the two governing boards have ultimate authority.