

LAFCO hearing on Valley Fire Department's SOI moved to April meeting



Stirring the pot

I understand turf wars, what causes them, and the fact that they could usually be avoided if someone wasn't out there stirring the pot.

In the case of the fire departments in and around the Fall River Valley, I'll lay the blame directly on LAFCO on the one hand and Cal Fire on the other. Why LAFCO wants to meddle in the affairs of Cassel is beyond me. Those folks don't want to be messed with. They don't and haven't wanted any outside interference and do quite well on their own. They are happy to help if called on, but they don't want outside interference in their affairs.

Regarding Soldier Mountain, McArthur and Fall River Mills, the three stations have got-ten along quite well since the inception of Soldier Mountain's fire station. They support each other and back each other up. They could and would sit down and solve their problems if they didn't have Cal Fire stirring the pot. Personally I'd like to see Soldier Mountain go through the effort and become a district and get totally out from under Cal Fire's control. Then they could decide their own destiny rather than have an outside agency meddling in their affairs. That way if they liked the idea of a formal sphere of influence with the other districts they could. If they didn't they wouldn't be obligated to.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Fall River Valley Coordinated Fire Protection District (SOI) Sphere of Influence

by Brent Cassity

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**(Not officially representing,
NW Lassen VFD or
McArthur VFD in this letter.)**

Citizens of Fall River Valley Pay Attention. This may affect your pocket book. This may affect your smile. This may affect your peace of mind. This will affect all sides of Valley politics. This will positively affect your digestion. You may not be aware, but the future of fire fighter emergency response within the Fall River Valley is being determined right now.

A Sphere of Influence has been proposed by the Fall River and McArthur Fire districts. This Sphere is, in fact, a map, which for McArthur and Fall River basically encompasses the boundaries of The Fall River Valley. Sphere of Influence is a legal term used by the Local Agency Formation Commission or LAFCO to describe a probable future boundary in which services are provided. In this case the probable future boundary part is moot as the proposed boundary is already the service area for the respective departments.

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However, Sphere of Influence has certain legal connotations in the sense that a nod is given to the holder of the Sphere as the likely leading agency in what is seen as a probable and foreseeable future scenario. It is important to point out that the Fall River and McArthur service area overlap a portion of the Soldier Mountain service area and vice versa. That is to say, Soldier Mountain County Volunteers share the same service area as McArthur and Fall River within the Valley Proper.

While these departments may share the same service area, they cannot share the same sphere of influence. Fall River and McArthur were covering the Soldier Mountain District long before its existence and since McArthur was instrumental in the Soldier Mountain Station's founding and because Soldier Mountain was not founded as a county department, among other reasons, LAFCO has deemed the sphere to belong jointly to McArthur, Fall River, and Northwest Lassen. If Soldier Mountain was an independent fire district, as it once was, like Fall River and McArthur, they would be included in the same sphere as those districts.

Now, according to LAFCO, the purpose of the sphere is to ensure the provision of efficient services by preventing overlapping jurisdictions and duplication of services. And LAFCOs coordinate the orderly development of a community through the reconciling of differences between agency plans so that the most efficient urban service arrangements are created for the benefit of area residents and property owners." Now this sounds really cool. I like it because it would speak to what is best for the Valley rather than a specific district.

However, we are dealing with Cal Fire. Cal Fire deals with what is best for Cal Fire covered areas, not independent districts. My interpretation of Cal Fire's Mike Hebrard, Shasta County Fire Chief and the ultimate authority at Soldier Mountain County Fire Department, is that the adoption of this sphere will lead to annexations, plummeting ISO (Property Insurance) ratings, poor emergency medical response and acute crappiness for the residents within Soldier Mountain's specific service area. He conveyed this sentiment among others at the LAFCO hearing in November and again at the December meeting.

The irony here is that no one has ever said anything about annexations except Cal Fire and if there were any annexations they would have to be created by and voted for by the people in the Soldier Mountain area (and the Cal Fire managed station which it claims to serve! In a recent Soldier Mountain Newsletter, Soldier Mountain chief Greg Mayer wrote "Soldier Mountain Volunteer Fire Company does not support this action as it will allow for future annexation of CSA #1 (County Service Area) by the fire protection districts which may affect the service we provide to our community.

"If annexation was to occur and our fire station closed, the response time to incidents would increase, and could lower our insurance rating which is currently the best we can get without a hydrant system." Another way of saying the same thing would be "We don't support this action because the very people we serve may decide to get rid of us by exercising that dangerous thing called voting, in fact they may just vote to close the department." Chief Mayer's doomsday scenario would also occur if a large meteorite were to strike the earth which has precisely the same probability of happening. Chief Greg Mayer must not have much faith in the residents he claims to serve.

Wake up people. The Fall River and McArthur Districts can't conduct a hostile takeover nor do they want to take over the Soldier Mountain

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Area. Annexations can only occur by the vote of the very residents to be annexed. They have to want to be annexed. The Soldier Mountain Fire Station (and their volunteers) is a necessary fixture in the Fall River Valley emergency response apparatus. During this entire fiasco Fall River and McArthur districts have spoken with respect and kindness towards Soldier Mountain Fire.

Nick Truax (Cal Fire Division Chief for the area) said at two separate meetings that he was worried about the relationships between the departments deteriorating because of the sphere issue. I assured him that in my experience Soldier Mountain had always conducted themselves as gentlemen and I wasn't really worried about it. That all went out the door after the last LAFCO commission meeting. As I heard it, Don Sandberg, Asst. chief of Soldier Mountain Fire and Jean Rogers, claimed that Soldier Mountain Fire Training was quite possibly the best in the known universe and thusly far superior to those knuckle draggers of McArthur and Fall River.

After his dissertation Joe Bruce and I, who attended the meeting together, were basically left in the fetal position, choking on our drool, feeling completely unworthy to be in the presence of such awesome, bad-assed, fire-fighter preparedness. I was tempted to call the principles of both the Fall River elementary and high school and suggest that those students who reside within CSA #1 be taught in separate classrooms, as they hail from a higher place. At the same meeting Chief Mayer chose to use his public speaking time to make dismissive comments about not having ever seen the North West Lassen Engine on an incident. It isn't worth the time to go there.

Repeatedly our medical skills were brought up and that we don't provide Advanced Life Support. The fact is, we have a staffed ambulance less than two miles from our department. It isn't volunteer. It is the very same ambulance that serves Soldier Mountain and the entire valley and beyond, with a backup. Again, we were accused of planning to annex the Soldier Mountain Department. And, again, even the most lucid explanation of the simplest fact (i.e., the people you serve must vote for that) failed to make as much as the smallest dent in the skulls of those who just don't want to hear it.

The bottom line is - no one knows what is ultimately going to take place. But, whatever happens shouldn't it be put to a vote? Cal Fire doesn't want any voting going on. LAFCO staff has already made a recommendation to the commission that it adopt this sphere of influence. At the last meeting with six commissioners present the vote was split 3 -to-3. This is a testament to the awesome power of the Cal Fire Political machine.

Does anybody really believe that two little independent volunteer departments are going to mount a significant challenge to Cal Fire? These are the guys who got the Cal Fire SRA Fee passed without those affected being allowed to vote. It is worth more than 3/4 of a billion dollars. These are the guys who lobbied the state and were successful in creating state law which requires volunteer fire fighters to have the same training as paid fire fighters. Think about that one.

On top of this, in my experience having been a fire fighter in the valley for 14 years, all major incidents (fires, etc..) have been passed on to Cal Fire's control regardless of district and/or boundaries. If there is one fact I'm certain of, it is that Cal Fire is here to stay. I don't believe, however, that my community, the Fall River Valley, should not have the option to vote to provide our own service. If this Sphere of Influence is not adopted I project that the Fall

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River Valley residents residing within the Cal Fire managed Soldier Mountain service area will forever lose their ability to opt out if they desire to do so.

Furthermore, if the SOI isn't adopted then that means (magically) that the McArthur-Fall River service area does not include Soldier Mountain. This has led several fire-board directors to the conclusion that McArthur and Fall River departments would then no longer respond into Soldier Mountain's area. This can't possibly be what is best for the Fall River Valley, though it may very well be what Cal Fire ultimately desires. To side step this issue Cal Fire has insisted that mutual aid agreements will keep Fall River and McArthur rolling into Soldier Mountain's area.

I question why this is true. What benefit is it to McArthur or Fall River? I believe that the best course for the Fall River Valley is to someday have its own staffed department. I have yet to speak to any Cal Fire manager in the area who doesn't agree with this position. What we don't agree on is who should be the managing agency. If such a department were to be created and the residents of the Soldier Mountain County service area didn't want to be part of it, so be it. If they did want to be a part of it they would have to make it happen themselves anyway. At least with approval of the currently proposed SOI they would have the option to vote one way or the other. I also have a fair idea of which scenario would cost more.

I freely acknowledge that my remarks here may contain an idea which is a long lost pipedream. Some of my opinions are clearly meant in jest but all of them are expressed with concern for, and what is best for, the Fall River Valley as a whole, not just one specific area. If the topic were our valley schools or the hospital I doubt there would be any of this ridiculous jockeying for position and I blame Cal Fire for crying 'wolf.'

Like many here I feel passionately about this Valley and I feel the same way about the Soldier Mountain area as any other.

I encourage people to get involved. Do you live in an affected area and have an opinion? Please share it. The next vote by the LAFCO commission is scheduled to take place on April 2nd. I wish to point out that my dealings with Cal Fire/County Fire on this matter have been generally mixed to negative with the exception of area Division Chief, Nick Truax and assistant county chief Bret Guvea. They have always provided straight, non-belligerent answers to my questions as well as being downright helpful even when we disagree. I hope both of these guys continue to move up in County Fire management.