



COUNTY OF SAN BENITO

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. How long has San Benito County contracted with the City of Hollister for fire protection services? When does the current contract expire?

Hollister Fire began providing fire services to the County of San Benito effective June 23, 2013. The initial cost for fire services was \$1,106,715 per year, with a CPI increase not to exceed 3% per year. The current contract expires December 31, 2025. With an automatic annual renewal on January 1, 2026, unless terminated pursuant to agreement.

2. How much has San Benito County paid the City of Hollister for fire protection services per year for the past six years?

Calendar Year Contract Amount	Optional Years (without prior termination)
2019: \$1,845,000	2026: \$2,379,268
2020: \$1, 992,600	2027: \$2,450,646
2021: \$2,052,378	2028: \$2,524,165
2022: \$2,113,949	
2023: \$2,177,367	
2024: \$2,242,688	
2025: \$2,309,969	

3. Why is San Benito County exploring other options when the existing contract with the City of Hollister doesn't expire until December 2025?

On June 20, 2024, the City of Hollister issued a letter to San Benito County stating that the City has the right to terminate the Contract, with or without cause. According to the notice letter, the City of Hollister executed its right to terminate the Fire Protection Service Contract with the County of San Benito, effective on a date specific of March 15, 2025. The City of Hollister is demanding to increase the annual cost by \$3.8 million to a total of \$6,042,688.00 a year, or they will discontinue providing fire protection services to the businesses and homeowners in the unincorporated areas of San Benito County effective March 15, 2025. The City of Hollister is not compromising and is set on a proposed increase of \$3.8 million, over a 170% increase from the current contracted cost.

4. Other than continuing to contract with the City of Hollister, what other options are available for fire protection services?

The County's options are:

- Explore a Hybrid model with CalFire and Local Staffing;
 - Form a Regional Fire Protection District with Neighboring Counties;
 - Build a New San Benito County Fire Department;
 - Contract with Private Fire service providers.
 - Leverage Volunteer or Combination Fire Department Models;
 - Creating a Joint Power Authority (JPA) with the City of Hollister and other agencies.
5. If San Benito County pays the increased amount requested by the City of Hollister (e.g., \$3.8 million/year), what is the impact on the County's budget and services?

A cost increase of more than 170% increase to a total of \$6,042,688.00 a year compared to \$2,242,688 for fire protection services will significantly impact the County's finances. This substantial proposed rise in the contract will strain the county budget, potentially diverting funds from other essential services (including public safety) and programs to cover the increased cost of fire protection services. This could potentially include the elimination of programs. The County must carefully assess how to accommodate this increase or explore alternative avenues while ensuring we continue to meet the fire protection needs of our community in a cost-effective manner. It is essential that the community understands the impacts and how critical the increase will affect the County's budget untimely, leading to the reduction of other services.

6. What happens if the County and the City don't agree by the end of the 270-day termination notice provided by the City of Hollister?

If the County and City do not reach an agreement for fire protection services by the end of the date certain in the termination notice, several outcomes may occur, such as:

Termination of Services: The City of Hollister will discontinue fire protection services for the unincorporated San Benito County. The County is actively exploring all options to prevent a gap in services from occurring, including exploring a hybrid model with CalFire and Local Staffing; Forming a new San Benito County Fire Department; Contracting with private fire service providers; Leveraging a volunteer or combination fire department models; and creating a Joint Power Authority (JPA) with the City of Hollister and other agencies.

Negotiation Extension: The County has requested an extension on the termination notice to renegotiate and work towards an agreement; however, the City has not agreed to retract or extend the termination notice.

Alternative Arrangements: The County of San Benito County may contract with an outside agency or consider providing fire protection services while exploring all options to serve this community best and continue to explore Cost-effective, viable solutions.

7. What did San Benito County do before contracting with the City of Hollister for Fire Protection?

The County of San Benito County contracted with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection “CAL Fire” before contracting with the City of Hollister for fire protection services.

8. Did you know San Benito County does not own a fire station?

The County of San Benito County has historically contracted for fire protection services and does not own a fire station.

9. Why was the 270-day termination clause triggered? Is it due to financial reasons, operational concerns, or other issues?

- a. The termination of service letter that was sent by the City of Hollister may have been triggered for a variety of reasons, including:
 - i. Financial concerns about the increasing cost of fire protection services for the City of Hollister.
 - ii. Operational challenges and increases may have included increasing staffing levels and overtime costs due to overtime incurred.
 - iii. Investment in capital assets and maintenance of facilities and capital assets.

10. What happens to fire protection during this period? Will there be any disruptions or changes in response times or staffing?

No changes or disruptions to fire protection services will occur during the notice period. However, if no solution can be reached through negotiations with the City of Hollister, the City of Hollister will not provide Fire Protection services to residents in unincorporated San Benito County.

11. Are mutual aid agreements in place to cover potential gaps in service?

Overall, mutual aid enhances the capability and effectiveness of fire response efforts, ultimately leading to better outcomes during emergencies. With mutual aid in place, municipalities can share resources, improve response time, enhance training and skills, and improve coordination during emergency incidents. Mutual Aid is not designed to fill gaps in fire protection services. However, the City of Hollister is unwilling to accept or compromise an extension to termination notice at this time.

12. How much is the current contract costing the County, and what were the key terms of the agreement with Hollister?

The current fiscal year FY 24/25 cost \$2,242,688 the terms and conditions in the agreement include:

The Fire Protection Services: Structure fire protection, Vegetation Fire, Vehicle Accident, Pre -Hospital Emergency Medical Services, Hazardous Material Incident, Technical Rescue Services, Hazardous Conditions Response (flooding, downed power lines, earthquake, etc.), Fire Investigations, disaster preparedness and response, Fire Inspections, and Pre -Planning Services for development projects. The City of Hollister Fire Department also serves as County Fire Chief as well as a County Fire Marshall.

13. Are there specific service levels or response time guarantees that might change after termination?

Currently, all of the City of Hollister firehouses are located within the city limits. Service levels could improve or change depending on many factors, including the options with which the County of San Benito moves forward. If the county contracts with CalFire for fire protection or implements another option, service will increase from Basic Life Support to Advanced Life Support. Response times may be influenced depending on the fire station's distance to locations in the unincorporated San Benito County.

14. What alternative plans is the County exploring? For example, forming a county fire department, contracting with another nearby city, or partnering with the Cal Fire Bureau of Land Management or other Fire Protection Districts.

The County is actively exploring several avenues to enhance and provide fire protection services in the unincorporated San Benito County, recognizing our community's critical need for effective emergency response in the most cost-effective way. Leveraging limited resources and consideration:

- i. Renegotiate the Contract with the City of Hollister;
- ii. Explore a Hybrid model with CalFire and Local Staffing;
- iii. Form a Regional Fire Protection District with Neighboring Counties;

- iv. Build a New San Benito County Fire Department;
- v. Contract with Private Fire service providers.
- vi. Leverage Volunteer or Combination Fire Department Models;
- vii. Creating a Joint Power Authority (JPA) with the City of Hollister and other agencies.

The County will ensure that our community receives timely, reliable, and professional fire protection services tailored to our specific circumstances in the unincorporated San Benito County in a cost-effective manner.

15. How will the County ensure continuity of fire services post-termination?

- a. To ensure continuity of fire services post-termination with the City of Hollister, the County will implement a comprehensive transition plan focusing on several key strategies.
- b. First, we will develop a detailed timeline for the transition, outlining the necessary steps and milestones to maintain uninterrupted service. This can potentially include identifying and training personnel to fill any gaps during the transition period. Currently exploring all options available to the County.
- c. Second, the County will establish strong partnerships with neighboring fire departments and agencies to facilitate mutual aid agreements and ensure that support is available.
- d. Furthermore, the County will prioritize community engagement and communication throughout the process, keeping residents informed about any changes and how they will be affected. By leveraging existing resources and fostering collaboration, we aim to guarantee that fire services remain effective and responsive, safeguarding the well-being of our community without interruption.

16. Will the County consider renegotiating with Hollister to maintain services at a different cost?

Yes, the County is open to renegotiation with the City of Hollister to explore maintaining fire services. The County team has been in discussions with the City Administration and there is no willingness to compromise making negotiations a challenge. Recognizing the importance of reliable fire protection for our community, the County is committed to finding a solution that meets the needs of our community while being a Cost-effective, viable solution. By engaging in discussions with the city team, we can bring terms and conditions that are agreeable to all parties. The County will prioritize providing essential fire services without compromising quality or response times, a collaborative approach to reach a mutually beneficial arrangement for all parties involved.

17. How will the termination and potential new fire protection options affect taxpayers? Are there anticipated increases or decreases in fire protection costs?

Increased Costs: The cost of living is increasing and is also impacting fire protection services as wages are increasing, gas prices are going up, and extreme weather conditions are on the horizon. With the City demanding a higher contract fee, the county will be seeking alternative fire protection options, which could be more expensive than the current budgeted allocation; the possibilities include providing fire protection services in-house and looking for additional partners. This could lead to increased taxes or fees to cover the new cost of providing fire protection services.

Service Quality and Response Times: If the county develops a department for fire protection services or contracts with a different provider, response time may change, and there may be an opportunity to improve the quality of service.

Local Funding for Fire Services: The county may explore budget adjustments or fund reallocations to ensure adequate fire protection services in San Benito County. This process could impact other local services or programs. To implement these changes, the county administration will require departments to demonstrate the restrictions on their current funding. Ultimately, this will involve making tough decisions about reducing funding from the general fund and informing departments about alternative funding opportunities.

Long-term Planning: The county is in the process of developing a long-term strategy for fire protection services that best serve the community of San Benito County.

18. Will property insurance rates be affected by any changes in fire service arrangements?

Potentially, changes in fire service arrangements between the county and city can affect property insurance rates for residents. Insurance companies typically assess the risk of fire based on several factors, including the availability and reliability of local fire protection services.

19. How will the County keep citizens informed about the progress of negotiations or decisions on new fire protection options?

The County is committed to keeping citizens informed about the progress of negotiations and decisions regarding fire protection options through a multi-faceted communication strategy. More information will be available on our website, posted to our social media channels, and sent in press releases. Updates will be given at Board of Supervisors meetings (when feasible), and we also plan to host Town Hall meetings. The number of meetings we host will depend on the level of interest and the need for additional dates and times. Your participation and feedback are crucial in this process. If you would like to be included in distributing press releases regarding this topic, please email sbcpio@sanbenitocountyca.gov. Your voice matters.

20. Will there be opportunities for public input before finalizing any new agreements?

Yes, there will be ample opportunities for public input before finalizing any new agreements or implementing a new option regarding fire protection services. The County is committed to engaging the community in this critical decision-making process. We encourage public participation and ensure that all input is considered as we work toward finalizing any agreements or implementing a new option. We aim to ensure that the community's needs and concerns are reflected in the decisions the County and Board of Supervisors make while being transparent in our progress to provide fire protection services for the unincorporated San Benito County.

21. What happens to firefighters currently serving the area under the contract? Will there be layoffs or redeployments?

The City has expressed a desire to avoid layoffs; however, if the County ceases its contributions outlined in the contract, we anticipate significant repercussions to the current Fire workforce. The County foresees that this decision would adversely affect fire personnel, resulting in reduced responsibilities and the potential closure of fire stations. They would serve a smaller geographical region and reduce county contribution to City Fire protection.

22. Will County employees lose their jobs, or will County services diminish due to an increased cost of purchasing fire protection?

County employees are not employed by the City fire department, but an anticipated increase in the cost of fire protection services will impact the County's services. The county will evaluate potential options for delivering fire protection services.

23. Will the County invest in additional resources, equipment, or fire stations if it establishes its fire department?

Yes, the County is exploring all options, including creating its fire department. The County will invest in establishing its fire department, including equipment and potentially establishing a fire station, to ensure effective and reliable service to County residents. The county is currently collecting fire impact fees, which can be used for fixed assets and facilities that are a direct result of new development and have to serve an increasing population. The goal is to create a well-equipped and trained fire department that meets the specific needs of our residents and enhances overall public safety.

24. What is the official timeline for decision-making, and when will citizens know the final plan for fire protection services after the 270 days?

Currently, the County is actively exploring multiple options. The County will be utilizing public input and feedback to develop a final timeline and decision. The County

anticipates a clearer understanding of the plan, and the next steps involved. We are committed to a thorough and thoughtful process and timeline and will ensure the community stays informed as we move forward.