



# Press Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 30, 2024

## Contractual Fire Protection in San Benito County

San Benito County has contracted with the City of Hollister for fire services since 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. On June 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024 the City of Hollister issued a letter to San Benito County stating that unless the County increases the annual cost by \$3.8 million they will discontinue providing fire protection services to people in the unincorporated areas of San Benito County starting on March 15th, 2025. That cost request is more than 160% increase, to bring our total annual payment to the city up to a total of \$6,042,688.00 in comparison to the more recent payment of \$2,242,688.

The potential cost increase of this magnitude could necessitate San Benito County to reduce other non-mandated services and possibly other public safety services. The full impact on taxpayers is currently unknown. However, with the rising costs for fire protection services in California, taxes will inevitably need to be increased, or service levels directly related to fire protection, or other non-mandated services will be reduced to cover the increased costs.

At this time, the County understands the City of Hollister issued the 270-day termination letter because the agreed-upon amounts identified in the contract between the City and the County are no longer sufficient to cover the City's costs. Additional analysis must be done to determine why the City's costs have increased significantly during the contract period. We have asked the city to provide the County with specific information and data that supports the additional need for these requested funds. The current contract states it is a requirement that the City of Hollister provide reports annually to the County Board of Supervisors on how the contract is going and other data-driven facts about the unincorporated calls for service. If we had received any of those reports, this level of action and rushed timeframe on all sides may have been preventable. At this point in time, the County is simply asking for more time to collect this necessary information and continue to negotiate with the City to prevent any lapse in services for the residents in all jurisdictions and to provide ample time to educate the public on the potential impacts and options.

There are several options available to San Benito County, but they all have pros and cons and require a deeper level of analysis and implementation that cannot be accomplished in the 270-day timeframe. Some of the options we are evaluating include but are not limited to, establishing the County's own fire department, creating a special Fire District, contracting with CalFire, a hybrid model of CalFire and local staffing, leveraging a volunteer or combination fire department model, creating a Joint Power Authority (JPA) with the City of Hollister and other

agencies, as well as contracting with a private company. The County is exploring all available options, including renegotiating with the City of Hollister. As of the latest negotiations meeting, the City of Hollister has been unwilling to negotiate on any of the options we provided and has not agreed to retract the 270 notice that allows us to continue to work with them on this matter.

270 days is not enough time to clearly analyze all the options for San Benito County residents and implement a new fire protection services model. As a result, if San Benito County and the City of Hollister can agree on a much lesser amount for the time being, fire protection services can continue until we can all come to a better understanding of what is needed. This uncertainty calls for urgent action and decision-making from the Board of Supervisors. During the 270-day period, we will strive to ensure there will be no impacts or disruptions to the fire protection service received by San Benito County residents, businesses and visitors.

Prior to contracting with the City of Hollister for fire protection services, San Benito County contracted with CalFire. However, due to increasing costs from CalFire, San Benito ended the relationship with CalFire and began contracting with the City of Hollister.

We really hope to come to a viable solution as soon as possible and we will keep you informed of any changes as soon as we possibly can. More information will be made available on our website, posted to our social media channels, sent in press releases, updates will be given at Board of Supervisors meetings (when feasible), and we will also host a Town Hall meeting on the evening of November 7<sup>th</sup> 2024. We would love to have you there as your participation and feedback is crucial in this process. If you would like to be included in the distribution of the press releases regarding this topic, please email [sbcpio@sanbenitocountyca.gov](mailto:sbcpio@sanbenitocountyca.gov). Your voice matters.

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