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Last modified Saturday, February 19, 2005 9:25 PM PST

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Riverside County firefighting costs double in three years



By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

What will come of the new audit of Riverside County's firefighting contract with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection remains to be seen. But Supervisor Bob Buster suggests one thing is clear: The county must rein in costs that have more than doubled in three years.

"We don't have unlimited funds," Buster said in a recent interview. "The sky is not the limit here. We can't just do anything we want."

Buster is one of two supervisors who were appointed this month by colleagues to pore over the 90-page audit delivered to the Board of Supervisors on Feb. 1. The other supervisor, Jeff Stone of Temecula, has declined comment for now. Later, the pair plan to make recommendations to the full board for improving fire service.

The audit states the county's annual cost increased from \$18 million in fiscal year 2000-01 to \$37 million in 2003-04, which ended last June 30.

Costs also soared for the 16 Riverside County cities ---- among them Temecula, Canyon Lake and Lake Elsinore ---- that receive service through the county contract. The cities' portion rose from \$14 million to \$33 million.

Supervisors ordered the audit in August to wrap their arms around the reasons for rising costs, and determine if breaking away from the state and forming an independent county fire department would save money. Auditors returned with a gloomy assessment that concluded the county would not only not save money, it would wind up paying one-third more.

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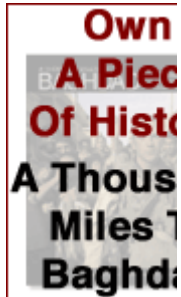
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An outside firm, CGR Management Consultants of Piedmont, was paid \$99,920 to do the audit.

Steven B. Frates, senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, said he had not seen the audit. But, having compared Riverside County firefighting costs with those of other Southern California counties in the late 1990s, he said the audit's underlying conclusion is probably correct.

"It is unlikely that the county would be able to provide the service at lower cost than contracting with the state," Frates said.

Part of the recent doubling of costs is a result of the regional firefighting force expanding and opening more stations to protect a growing population from loss of life and property, officials say. But much of it ---- 38 percent ---- stems from wage increases, the audit states.

For that reason, Buster said the state firefighters union wields too much influence over what Riverside County residents pay for protection and the county too little.

Buster said the county has no say over salaries, overtime, work schedules and benefits ---- all key factors in contract cost.

Clout in Sacramento

Terry McHale, policy director for the 5,000-member CDF Firefighters Association in Sacramento, disagreed that the county is powerless to shape the contract price.

"To suggest that the contract is one-sided is absurd," McHale said. "Obviously the Board of Supervisors has influence. It's a contractual situation."

The county's relationship with the Department of Forestry, or CDF, dates to 1927. It is essentially the state agency that runs Riverside County's fire department, with an army of 700 state firefighters, 120 county employees and 1,110 volunteers, and 93 fire stations. The county owns most of the stations and fire engines.

This fiscal year, CDF fights fires in parts of 35 counties under 146 contracts worth \$165 million. Riverside County, by itself, accounts for one-fourth of that dollar amount. Combined with the 16 cities, the region pays 45 percent of the statewide firefighting freight.

"If the county and the cities are 45 percent of the state's contract, I think it is untenable for us to keep going forward without any control," Buster said. "If they want to keep our business, the state needs to make some changes."

Buster said it was disappointing that the report, for all its technical recommendations, did not urge the county to lean on its heavyweight status in the state contract system.

"They saw no obvious ways to take advantage of that," he said. "That would have been the first thing I would have said if I was the auditor: 'You guys have half their business. You've got some clout up there. And here's what I recommend that you do.' "

San Bernardino County's experience

Similar concerns led San Bernardino County to break off from CDF and form a separate fire agency more than six years ago.

"We went into this because of rising costs and the ability to control our costs," said Assistant Fire Chief Dan Wurl. "And we believe that we have saved money."

Costs continue to rise, but at a slower, more manageable pace, Wurl said. In part, that is because the county has fewer managers than did CDF.

Wurl said San Bernardino phased in its 1998 conversion, bringing the desert on line in

September, the mountains in October and valleys in December.

"I think it was a good move for the county, one that helped bring efficiency throughout the organization," he said.

Severing ties may be a good move for Riverside County, too, Buster said. And the supervisor said he will urge colleagues to consider forming its own fire department despite the audit's overall conclusion.

Buster said the county could retain state firefighters at current salary levels, then trim costs by cutting out some middle management and hiring firefighters from volunteer ranks. Those new firemen and women, he said, could be put on a more modest pay scale than the one the state uses.

Judging by the clamoring for jobs now, there would be no shortage of interest among volunteers. "When there is an opening, there is literally a line around the block," he said.

Built-in overtime

Buster said money also could be saved through curbing overtime.

According to the audit, state firefighters operate on a 72-hour work week. That means 19 hours of overtime is automatic, given the trade's 53-hour threshold for triggering overtime pay.

As well, the rate for overtime pay is rising. A July 2001 contract called for a gradual tripling, from half of firefighters' hourly pay to 1 1/2 times the rate by November of this year.

The audit noted most area cities with their own departments use a 56-hour week, with three hours overtime. Buster said the county could adopt something similar.

But the audit suggests 29 percent more people would be needed under that approach, offsetting savings. Although Riverside County could negotiate directly with a new county firefighters union, "it would not be prudent to assume that the county would be able to gain any substantial economic advantage," the report stated.

San Bernardino's Wurl said his county shifted to a 56-hour week, but not because of cost considerations. He said CDF's time-and-a-half overtime rate roughly equals what an agency would pay in salary and benefits for extra firefighters.

The advantage to the 56-hour week is the depth it brings to the firefighting team, something that is crucial when agencies battle runaway, wind-driven wildfires, Wurl said. If a 72-hour schedule were still in place, he said, San Bernardino County would have 160 firefighters. As it is, the county has 250.

"And we pretty much deployed every one of those in the Old and Grand Prix fires (of October 2003)," Wurl said.

Dead on arrival?

Still, with the audit's conclusion that a separate agency would cost Riverside County \$12.5 million more every year, Buster faces an uphill climb to keep the idea on the table. Board of Supervisors Chairman Marion Ashley, for one, wants to take it off.

"Right now I'm not interested in going against the grain," Ashley said. "The report said, 'Keep what you have. You've got a pretty good thing here.' If we do decide to go our own way, it is clearly going to cost us more money."

The annual increase aside, the county would have to come up with millions to build a command center and administrative headquarters, the audit stated.

It's just too risky to change, Ashley said.

"This is a terrific firefighting force. They have proven themselves time and time again," he said. "We don't want to do anything to lose that because you can see what happened next door in San Diego County."

Don't forget San Diego

Ashley said he was referring to the lack of coordination that was blamed, in part, for an inability to halt the spread of wildfires there in October 2003. San Diego lacks a unified regional agency; instead it relies on numerous municipal and rural fire districts.

The audit said the unified command structure CDF brings to the table is one of the Riverside County contract's greatest strengths.

McHale, the union official, maintained cost is one of the contract's strengths, too.

"It is a contract that firefighters should not at all apologize for," McHale said. "They have kids who need to go to college and mortgages that need to be paid. It's an incredibly demanding job. They do not get big money. They are not overpaid."

And, he said, "You're not going to save money by not using CDF."

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