

MAKING THE CASE FOR EFFICIENCY: MAXIMIZING EMERGENCY SERVICES IN CAMBRIA

INTRODUCTION

Cambria is a coastal community long known for water supply issues and remains in a Stage 3 water emergency as of March 2015. A separate report issued by the 2014-2015 San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) found that Cambria also faces another severe, but less recognized emergency risk.

There is an increased risk of catastrophic fire in Cambria because fire suppression and emergency services are characterized by aging equipment, lack of financial reserves, relative isolation and overlapping services provided by different emergency responders.

Cambria residents have consistently shown a willingness to fund key services such as fire suppression, emergency medical services and other types of emergency responses through approval of local fire assessments and healthcare special district taxes. However, the perceived quality of current services may potentially mask other significant shortfalls and inefficiencies. Furthermore, the community may be missing opportunities for improvements.

This investigative report evaluates how current agencies providing emergency services interact and impact Cambria. It examines the current strengths and weaknesses of:

- Local firefighting response and equipment.
- Local ambulance response and equipment.
- The overlapping relationships of the Cambria Community Services District Fire Department, CAL FIRE and the Cambria Community Healthcare District.

Finally, this report recommends potential paths for improvement.

ORIGIN

In reviewing a separate issue, the Grand Jury identified concerns about the status of local firefighting equipment. This led to inquiries about fire suppression services in general, the level of fire risk and the relationship of the Cambria Community Services District Fire Department to other relevant agencies and organizations including CAL FIRE, San Luis Obispo County Fire Department and the Cambria Community Healthcare District.

In a separate report titled “In a State of Emergency? Assessing Fire Risk in Cambria,” this Grand Jury addressed the issue of wildland-urban interface fire risk. This report focuses on fire suppression and related services.

AUTHORITY

California Penal Code section 925 authorizes the Grand Jury to investigate and report on the operations, accounts and records of special districts within the county.

METHOD

The Cities and Special Districts Committee of the Grand Jury conducted this investigation. The Grand Jury interviewed key staff members of relevant organizations including CAL FIRE, Cambria Community Services District (CCSD), CCSD Fire Department (Cambria FD), Cambria Community Healthcare District (CCHD) and San Luis Ambulance Service. It also interviewed a representative director of the CCSD, a representative director of the CCHD, the general manager of another community services district that has considered contracting with CAL FIRE, and former fire chiefs of local fire departments. It reviewed a number of organizational websites and pertinent documents including National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) guidelines, Cambria FD planning and strategy documents, Cambria FD general plan, wildland fire pre-plan for the Cambria area and independent fire service studies done for other communities of similar size.

BACKGROUND

Three separate organizations provide emergency services to the Cambria area:

- CCSD provides the community with water, wastewater treatment, parks and recreation, and fire and safety services. Cambria FD, a part of CCSD, maintains a fire station at 2850 Burton Drive in Cambria. This station is staffed 24 hours a day by a three-person team: a captain, an engineer and a reservist.
- CAL FIRE¹ operates Fire Station 10 at 6126 Coventry in Cambria. During fire season², four persons (one captain or engineer and three firefighters) staff the CAL FIRE station around the clock. During other periods, two persons (one captain or engineer and one firefighter) staff the station. This is a state-funded station. San Luis Obispo County augments funding during non-fire season through the Amador Plan.³
- CCHD provides emergency medical services, crisis intervention and health and safety education to a North Coast area that includes, but is larger than, the CCSD boundaries. Local voters approved two separate taxes, one in 1985 and the other in 2006, to fund local ambulance and paramedic services. The CCHD maintains an ambulance station at 2535 Main Street, Cambria, with two ambulances staffed full-time.

NARRATIVE

Cambria is bounded by ocean on one side and is separated from other communities (and their fire and emergency departments) by miles of open land and ranches. It is nestled in one of only three remaining natural stands of Monterey pine in the world⁴. Popular with tourists, seasonal homeowners and retirees, its population of over 6000 may vary greatly depending on the time of year.

¹ CAL FIRE is the fire protection arm of the California Department of Forestry and Fire. It protects State Responsibility Areas (SRA) and is the agency that San Luis Obispo County has contracted with to protect county areas outside of special districts and cities. All of Cambria is within an SRA.

² Fire season generally is considered the summer and autumn months but exact dates may vary based on rainfall and other conditions.

³ The Amador Plan refers to state law that allows the director of CAL FIRE to enter into an agreement with another governmental organization to provide fire suppression services.

⁴ The other two are in Monterey and Ano Nuevo (near Santa Cruz). In addition, two populations of a two-needle variety exist on two small Mexican islands called Cedros and Guadalupe, off the coast of Baja California.

Because of its environment, the current drought, location and population, Cambria is a wildland-urban interface⁵ community facing a severe fire threat. As a result, it is important that its limited emergency resources are managed and deployed as effectively as possible. This report will look at all three agencies involved in providing fire suppression or emergency services to this area.

CAMBRIA COMMUNITY SERVICES DISTRICT FIRE DEPARTMENT

The Cambria FD services an area consistent with the boundaries of CCSD, which includes the urbanized area of the Cambria coast. The Cambria FD is operated by CCSD and its budget of approximately \$1.7 million is funded through local assessments and tax revenues.

Personnel

The Cambria FD employs a fire chief, three captains and three engineers full-time; approximately fifteen reservists are part-time employees. All full-time staff are trained as certified Firefighter I or higher, and also trained as emergency medical technicians or paramedics. There is a high turnover rate among reservists, and their pay is near minimum wage. Most take the position to obtain on-the-job training needed for full-time positions, often at other fire departments, resulting in training and staffing challenges. Support functions such as fire safety, training, preplanning inspections, vehicle maintenance or fire prevention are assigned to full-time staff as additional responsibilities.

In 2014 the current fire chief announced he would retire in July 2015. Recently, he extended that date to October 2015. In late February 2015, the CCSD took the first step in seeking a replacement by initiating a Request for Proposal from a recruitment agency.

Responsibilities

Cambria FD responds to fires and other emergency situations such as vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, public service assists⁶ and the like. In addition to responding to alarms, staff is responsible for local fire prevention activities including code adoption, permitting, plan review

⁵ A wildland-urban interface area is one where human development is close to, or within, natural terrain and flammable vegetation and where high potential for wildland fire exists.

⁶ An example of a public assist is if a person falls and calls for help in getting up.

and inspections. Cambria FD also provides water rescue and may respond to incidents outside its area due to mutual/automatic aid agreements.

Multiple Unit Response

Fire calls generate responses from both Cambria FD and the local CAL FIRE station staff, with whom the Cambria FD has a mutual/automatic aid agreement. This typically results in five or more firefighters on-site, meeting the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) requirement for at least four firefighters on-site before a two-person team can enter a structure fire for rescue. Therefore, the combined response of both departments to a fire is appropriate. Industry practice⁷ recommends at least 10 to 12 firefighters on-scene for initial response for structure fires. In such cases, a call for aid would go to other fire departments in the area, all of which are at least 20 minutes away.

In other 911 emergencies, such as medical aids or vehicle accidents, Cambria FD, CAL FIRE and ambulance services of CCHD all respond. This can result in up to seven emergency responders and multiple vehicles on-scene.

Equipment

Cambria FD's primary equipment is a 2006 Pierce Type I fire engine and the reserve engine is a 1988 FMC Type I fire engine⁸. Although no legal requirements govern the length of usage for a fire engine, general guidelines suggest that a 28-year-old engine is well past its recommended service life.⁹ In addition to its age, the 1988 reserve engine has an open rear cab. An open cab exposes firefighters in a wildland fire and therefore does not meet NFPA guidelines. Currently, Cambria FD has no vehicle replacement fund or plan for this reserve engine.

⁷ When this report references general guidelines, it reflects consolidated input received from multiple firefighting professionals and a review of pertinent documents from the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA). *NFPA 1710* standards cover full-time departments, and *NFPA 1720* covers volunteer departments.

⁸ FMC is a model name for fire equipment sold by the FMC Corporation.

⁹ "In general a 10 to 15 year life expectancy is considered normal for first line pumping engines." *National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) Handbook*, 17th Edition.

Strategic Plan

In 2003 Cambria FD developed an initial long-term Master Plan. It detailed an approach to move from a volunteer fire department to a full-time, professional force. In 2011 Cambria FD on its own initiative drafted a new Master Plan for the fire department with a recommendation that the CCSD develop a long-term community strategic plan that encompassed the fire department. Key members of the CCSD leadership acknowledge not being familiar with the details of the 2011 Cambria FD Master Plan recommendations. As of January 2015, despite requests by Cambria FD staff, the 2011 Cambria FD Master Plan still has not been placed on the CCSD Board agenda or discussed with the broader community. Therefore, the Board and community have had no opportunity to debate the adequacy of current coverage or debate relevant trade-offs with other community priorities; or set long-term directions.

CAL FIRE

Cambria is within a designated State Responsibility Area. It is protected by CAL FIRE Station 10 which is located in Cambria and serves the North Coast of the county with fire suppression and emergency services. CAL FIRE has a mutual/automatic aid agreement with Cambria FD.

CAL FIRE Contracts

A variety of government entities contract with CAL FIRE directly (or indirectly through the San Luis Obispo County contract with CAL FIRE) to provide fire services for their respective areas. San Luis Obispo County contracts with CAL FIRE to provide fire suppression services for all county lands outside cities and special districts. In addition, CAL FIRE services the City of Pismo Beach, the special districts of Los Osos and Avila Beach, and Cayucos through the Amador Plan. CAL FIRE also operates dispatch services under contract for a number of additional fire departments including Cambria FD. CAL FIRE enters into negotiating any agreement only upon a request from another government entity. The parties must determine such a contract would be mutually beneficial.

Nature of Contracts

In a CAL FIRE contract, the contracting community retains overall responsibility for setting the requirements of its fire coverage, such as staffing levels. It retains ownership of its fire station(s)

and equipment. Contract agreements vary from one year to multiple years. Fees are quoted on a “not to exceed” basis with refunds when actual costs prove lower. Current employees typically are offered positions at the same rank within CAL FIRE. For the contracting community, benefits may include lower costs, simpler administration, economies of scale¹⁰ and access to specialized roles, such as hazardous materials response, chief officer coverage, fire investigation, fire prevention and safety functions. For the local fire department staff, employment with CAL FIRE may result in a different work schedule and may at the same time provide better training and long-term career opportunities. For CAL FIRE, benefits include opportunities to achieve increased economies of scale and better coordination of resources.

Cambria FD and CAL FIRE Contract

In the past, CCSD asked CAL FIRE to provide an overview presentation on capabilities for contracting fire suppression services. Although this was done, no further detailed conversations occurred. Individuals interviewed from the involved parties acknowledged the potential for improved operations or cost control and said they were open to considering such a contract.

Based on other existing CAL FIRE contracts and on Grand Jury discussions with the potential parties, an agreement between CCSD and CAL FIRE would include CAL FIRE assuming operation of the fire station on Burton Drive while continuing to maintain its station on Coventry Lane. CAL FIRE could offer employment contracts to current employees of Cambria FD and assume administrative, training and operational activities. It may require CCSD to update its equipment to CAL FIRE standards. Dispatch services could roll into the overall contract.

In such a contract, requirements for staffing levels would be determined by CCSD as part of its negotiations with CAL FIRE. CCSD and the community would determine whether to maintain full-time staffing of three, reduce staffing or expand to four as envisioned in the 2003 master plan.

¹⁰ Economies of scale refers to the expectation that a larger organization may be able to reduce unit costs by spreading expenses across a larger base, using buying power to obtain better prices, and balance resources more effectively.

Potential Benefits of Contracting

If CCSD were to contract Cambria FD responsibilities to CAL FIRE, the following benefits would likely occur:

- Reduced costs through lower administrative or management costs, changed staffing levels or economies of scale.
- Added fire prevention resources, especially as it relates to specialized roles such as forestry management that might be shared across CAL FIRE operations in the county through coordination and access with the existing resources of CAL FIRE.
- Increased effectiveness of staff through existing training programs and procedures already in place for the much larger CAL FIRE staff.
- Better pathway to updating outdated equipment as a requirement to entering into a contract.
- Improved and diverse career paths, training and mobility for employees.

CAMBRIA COMMUNITY HEALTHCARE DISTRICT

CCHD is a public, tax- and fee-supported special district located in San Luis Obispo County. It operates an advanced life support ambulance service, maintains a volunteer crisis intervention team, owns a professional medical building and provides community healthcare education. With a budget of approximately \$1.5 million, CCHD employs 5 full-time and 15 part-time paramedics, as well as 4 full-time EMTs and 14 part-time EMTs. It operates two ambulances. Its boundaries extend from north of Cayucos to the northern San Luis Obispo County line. In addition, it provides services to a portion of southern Monterey County.

Financial Status

About two-thirds of CCHD's income is derived from two local citizen-approved measures (AA and B); the remaining one-third is from ambulance revenue. Recently, CCHD has been operating at or near a deficit. The 2014-2015 projected budget is just over \$1.5 million with an operating deficit of \$89,489.

Ambulance Equipment

CCHD operates two 2008 Dodge Sprinter ambulance units, with a 2000 and a 2002 Ford Van Type II as backup ambulances. The agency also operates a 1999 Ford Expedition as a supervisory/command vehicle. Industry standards suggest a typical ambulance service life of 200,000 miles.¹¹ CCHD's primary equipment averages 25,000 miles per year placing the Sprinter units near the end of service life and both Type II ambulances beyond their typical service life. Similar to the situation with the fire engines at Cambria FD, the CCHD has no current replacement fund for these ambulances although the agency has recently submitted an application for a federal grant to replace one unit.

Overlap with Cambria FD and CAL FIRE

In incidents other than fire, personnel from CAL FIRE, Cambria FD and CCHD respond to each emergency call. Typically, this results in six or more people on-scene and multiple vehicles. It should be noted that there are times when more than six people could be needed to deal with an emergency. In 2013, there were 1265 responses with 484 requiring transport to a higher level of medical care. The rest were described as non-transport, stand-by, public assist and other types of calls. Interviewees acknowledged that there may be opportunities for better response coordination.

There are other elements of overlap between CCHD and Cambria FD, including maintaining separate facilities and separate administrative staff. The districts compete for employees with the same set of skills; in fact, several employees work at both CCHD and Cambria FD.

Potential Merger

Over the past two years, the CCSD and the CCHD discussed in detail the potential for integrating the Cambria FD and its emergency response operations with the CCHD emergency response operations through a joint powers authority or other type of merger. Benefits and potential issues were identified, legal documents were drafted and an ad hoc committee was

¹¹ As determined by the benchmark data program of the North Central EMS Institute and reported by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies (Canada).

formed with representatives from the boards of both districts. However, the discussions were later put on hold. Participants indicated that a focus on the water crisis took precedence.

The initial work identified one major roadblock resulting from the differences between CCHD being a healthcare district and CCSD being a services district. This likely prevents a paramedic employee of the CCHD from being able to do firefighter work. One way to overcome this would be to allow the CCSD and CCHD to enter into a joint powers agreement to coordinate service, or a similar memorandum of understanding. Such work has not yet begun. However, it would be possible, in advance of resolving the final organizational structure issues, to co-locate CCHD personnel and equipment at the existing CCSD Burton Drive facility and achieve some economies of scale.

Benefits identified from an overall merger would likely include:

- Lower costs through lower administrative or management costs, changed staffing levels and roles, economies of scale and elimination of overtime pay through use of a FLSA exemption¹².
- Added coordination of deploying resources especially as it relates to certain types of calls such as public assist through coordination and control of shared staff.
- Greater level of professionalism and training through integrating staff.
- Increased staffing levels for fire response by allowing Emergency Medical Service (EMS) workers to also serve in firefighting functions.

CONCLUSIONS

Cambria has challenges relating to fire suppression and emergency services. Current providers of these services face several fiscal challenges including funding the replacement of aging, costly and specialized equipment. At the same time, the existence of multiple agencies with overlapping responsibilities offers the potential for efficiency improvements and cost savings through various alternatives for cooperation. Absent the sense of an emergency or the presence

¹² The *Fair Labor Standards Act* is administered by the U.S. Department of Labor.

of any long-term strategic plans to address these issues and opportunities, there are no signs that the relevant agencies in Cambria will act to implement these alternatives.

FINDINGS

F1. Elements of fire equipment, such as a fire engine, owned by CCSD and operated by Cambria FD are outdated by industry standards and CCSD lacks a replacement fund or plan.

F2. Elements of emergency service equipment, such as ambulances, owned and operated by the CCHD are outdated by industry standards and CCHD lacks a replacement fund or plan.

F3. CCSD lacks an overall long-term strategy for improving fire and emergency services including acquiring and maintaining essential equipment, managing costs, public safety and balancing fire suppression with other community needs.

F4. There is an opportunity for improved fire suppression service if the CCSD were to explore contracting Cambria FD responsibilities with CAL FIRE.

F5. There is an opportunity for enhanced career development and training for existing fire and paramedic personnel as part of a larger organization.

F6. There is an opportunity for improved emergency services by aligning Cambria FD, CCHD and CAL FIRE emergency response.

F7. There is an opportunity for improved emergency services if Cambria FD and CCHD were to investigate centralizing ambulance services at the Cambria FD station.

F8. There is an opportunity to reduce overhead by merging organizations and use the savings to establish equipment replacement funds or to pay for other activities such as training, fire prevention and public education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. Cambria Community Services District should, with community input, develop, adopt and implement a strategic plan that addresses a multi-year approach to fire suppression and emergency services.

R2. Cambria Community Services District should request CAL FIRE make a presentation regarding contracting for fire suppression in Cambria and obtain community input.

R3. Cambria Community Services District and Cambria Community Healthcare District should reactivate their ad hoc committee to integrate and coordinate activities and obtain community input.

R4. Cambria Community Services District and Cambria Community Healthcare District should implement the combined organizational structure which most effectively reduces administrative costs and improves services.

R5. Cambria Community Services District and Cambria Community Healthcare District should set in place funding approaches, including reserves, to update or replace fire and emergency equipment.

R6. Cambria Community Services District and Cambria Community Healthcare District should determine how to best utilize firefighters and EMS personnel within a common management structure.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

Cambria Community Services District is required to respond to Findings 1 and 3-8 and Recommendations 1-6.

Cambria Community Healthcare District is required to respond to Findings 2 and 5-8 and Recommendations 3-6.

The responses shall be submitted to the presiding judge of the San Luis Obispo County Superior Court. Please provide a paper copy and an electronic version of all responses to the Grand Jury.

Presiding Judge	Grand Jury
Presiding Judge Dodie Harman Superior Court of California 1035 Palm Street, Room 355 San Luis Obispo, CA 93408-1000	San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury P.O. Box 4910 San Luis Obispo, CA 93403-4910 GrandJury@co.slo.ca.us