

# POTTER VALLEY COMMUNITY ACTION PLAN

At the second Potter Valley Community Action Plan Meeting Several community members discussed local fire services, and asked what opportunities are available to improve fire and emergency response. The idea of a benefit assessment for the Community Service District was discussed. Planwest Partners has prepared the following report which is for informational and discussion purposes only.

## IMPROVING POTTER VALLEY FIRE PROTECTION SERVICES

Background. Community Services Districts (CSDs), as defined by state law, are independent multi-purpose special districts that are governed by elected boards of directors. CSDs can provide the broadest range of services of any type of special district in California, including fire protection, water, wastewater, recreation, and street lighting services. CSDs have the power to provide many additional services that are enumerated in Government Code Section 61600, or can seek additional powers through special legislation.

The Potter Valley Community Services District (PVCSD) provides fire protection services to the Potter Valley area (see Potter Valley map on following page). The fire department is all-volunteer, and operates a single station on Main Street in Potter Valley.

Based on information from the California State Controller (*2001-02 Special District Annual Report*), the PVCSD provides only fire protection services. The PVCSD primarily receives revenue from property taxes (approximately \$43,000 in 2001-02) and charges for services (approximately \$4,000 in 2001-02 which likely relates to charges for state or federal wildfires). The PVCSD fire department expends nearly its entire budget on services and supplies.

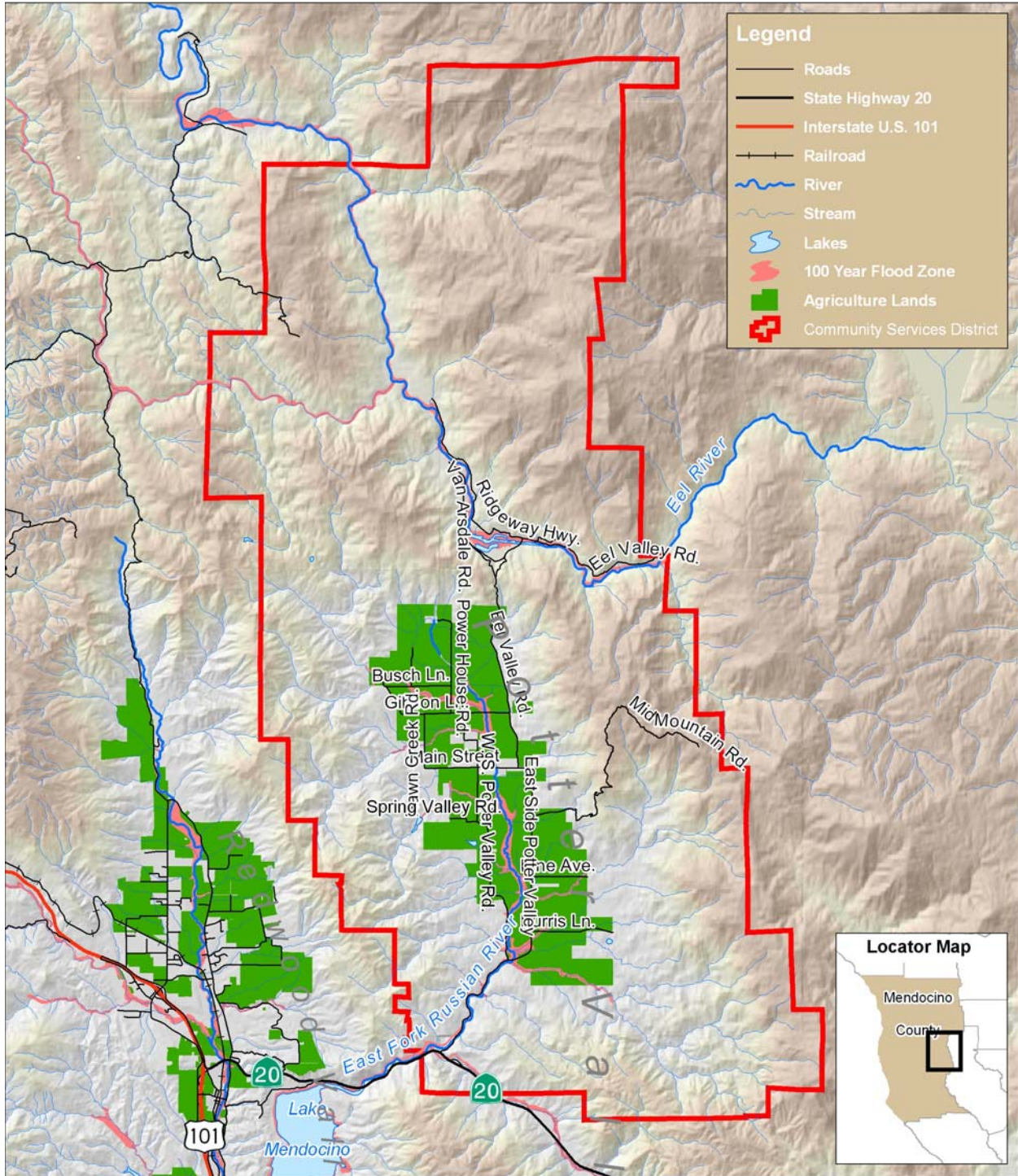
Fire Protection in Mendocino County. The *Mendocino County General Plan Update Background Report* found several common problems faced by fire related districts in the area:

1. Medical calls are becoming the very common and require increasing coordination with ambulance service providers. Reductions in the level of ambulance service require that firefighters take on greater emergency medical responsibilities.
2. Mendocino County provides dispatch services and is having trouble supporting the costs associated with this service.
3. These are increasing demands to provide service outside of district boundaries with no off-setting source of revenue.

Improved Level of Service. The Potter Valley Community Action Plan process has identified improved local fire protection as a planning goal. The following steps could improve the level of fire protection service in Potter Valley. The actual steps selected should depend on the specific service improvements desired by the community.

1. Increase the number of volunteers
2. Increase training (Fire/Rescue/Medical/HazMat);
3. Replace/upgrade equipment and apparatus; or,
4. Improve fire department facilities.

# Potter Valley Community Action Plan Community Services District Boundary



**Legend**

- Roads
- State Highway 20
- Interstate U.S. 101
- Railroad
- River
- Stream
- Lakes
- 100 Year Flood Zone
- Agriculture Lands
- Community Services District



Map Compiled by Planwest Partners  
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Selecting any of the above steps would likely require additional funding. Recruiting additional volunteers would be the least costly, requiring at minimum, additional funds for personal protective equipment and insurance. Although training, equipment, and apparatus may be expensive, improving facilities (fire station) would likely be the most expensive.

Funding Sources. There are few grant funding sources available to local fire departments for facilities or operations. Common competitive grant programs utilized by volunteer fire departments include the U.S. Fire Administration Firefighter Assistance Grant Program, other Homeland Security funds, and the CDF Volunteer Fire Assistance Program. Additional funding sources may be available if the PVCSD boundary is adjacent to federal lands. Sources of ongoing funding are limited to taxes and fees that are approved by the landowners or voters of the PVCSD. Fund raising through subscriptions, annual home/business visits, or events could be done every year and can supplement existing property tax, but may not be a dependable source of revenue.

The following table compares various approaches that could be taken to improve fire protection in the Potter Valley coupled the most suitable potential funding sources. It should be noted that many of the activities described below (such as training) would be best undertaken as part of a coalition of local fire departments.

Approach	Funding Mechanism		
	Grants	Fund Raising	Assessment
Purchase Equipment ( <i>e.g., PPE, SCBA, TIC, hose/nozzle, communications, etc.</i> )	●	○	
Purchase Apparatus ( <i>EMS/Rescue, tender, engine</i> )	●	○	●
Increase Training - One Time	●	●	
Increase Training - Ongoing		○	●
Improve Facilities (fire station)	○	○	●

- *good primary source*
- *good secondary or matching source*

Ongoing funding, as opposed to one time grant or donation funding is often raised through the approval of a special tax or assessment. Benefit assessments are mechanisms often used for raising fire districts revenue. Assessments must be approved by the property owners of the CSD. If a benefit is chosen by a district, it is critical that the fire department clearly present the reason for the additional tax/fee to property owners and identify the additional benefit that will be received.

Although they are usually sent out with the property tax bill, special assessments are not property taxes. Unlike taxes (including special taxes), the sum of a special assessment cannot exceed the cost of the improvement or service it is financing. Furthermore, special assessments cannot be levied against those properties which do not directly benefit from the improvements being financed. Property that is outside the area receiving the specific improvements being financed cannot be charged a special assessment.

The basic property tax on the other hand, are levied on eligible real property based upon that property's assessed valuation, unrelated to the proportional benefits being received by that property. So called "special taxes" are levied for a specific purpose, but are similarly unrelated to the proportional benefit being received from the improvements being financed.

The procedure for establishing a new assessment is generally described in the following:

**Engineers Report.** A detailed engineer's report must be prepared by a registered professional engineer that contains the following:

- (1) Total amount of money chargeable to the assessment district,
- (2) Amount chargeable to each parcel in the district,
- (3) Duration of the payments,
- (4) Reason for the assessment, and
- (5) Basis upon which the proposed assessment was calculated.

The report should also include a description of the improvements or services to be financed through the special assessment, the proposed district boundaries, and a description of the special benefit that each parcel would receive as a result of the assessment. (The assessment district can be coterminous with the PVCSD boundaries or just a portion. The assessment district can also have zones of benefit).

**Election – Property Owners.** The PVCSD must receive approval from a majority of the affected property owners casting a ballot in order to create an assessment district. In tabulating the ballots, the ballots are weighted according to the proportional financial obligation of the affected property. All owners of property within the assessment district must be mailed a detailed notice of a public hearing and a ballot with which to voice their approval or disapproval of the proposed district. Notice must be mailed at least 45 days prior to the hearing.

**Protest Hearing.** Prior to creating an assessment, the PVCSD must hold a public hearing. At the hearing, the PVCSD must consider all protests to formation of the district. Assessment district proceedings must be abandoned if a majority of the ballots received by the conclusion of the hearing protest creation of the district. Ballots are to be weighted according to the proportional financial obligation (or benefit) of the affected property - the larger the financial obligation, the greater the weight that must be assigned to that property.

For example, if the total units of benefit (see discussion below for description of units of benefit) for the entire assessment district equal 1,000 and a single landowner possesses multiple properties that equal 100 units of benefit. If this property owner were to protest the assessment, this vote would represent only 10 percent of the votes, or a minority protest.

Costs associated with establishing the assessment often include preparation of the engineer's report, election costs, and legal fees.

**Calculation of Assessment.** In order to calculate the benefit assessment, the total improvement or service cost must be determined. A methodology must also be developed to determine the degree to which each land use type benefits (units of benefit) from the new improvement or service. Often, the Assessor’s Use Code is used to differentiate between use types (i.e., Single Family Residential-Vacant, Single Family Residential -Improved, Multi-Family Residential-2 to 4 Units, Commercial-Vacant, etc.). Based on the engineers report apportions benefit and cost to each use type (see the following table for an example).

<b>Actual Land Use</b>	<b>Units of Benefit</b>
Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Single Family Residential-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Single Family Residential -Improved	4 Unit(s) per Parcel
Multi-Family Residential-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Multi-Family Residential-2 to 4 Units	8 Unit(s) per Parcel
Multi-Family Residential-5 to 9 Units	10 Unit(s) per Parcel
Rural-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Rural-Improved	4 Unit(s) per Parcel
Ag. Preserve Contact-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Ag. Preserve Contact-Improved	4 Unit(s) per Parcel
Commercial-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Commercial-Store, Office, Medical	10 Unit(s) per Parcel
Commercial-Motel, Restaurant, Service Station	12 Unit(s) per Parcel
Industrial-Vacant	1 Unit(s) per Parcel
Industrial-Light	16 Unit(s) per Parcel

Source: Assessment for Fire Protection Services in the Trinidad Area, CSA-4, Humboldt County.

To calculate the assessment for a given parcel, the units of benefit attributable to the appropriate use type, based on the Assessor’s records, would be multiplied by the assessment amount per unit of benefit. For example, if the assessment per unit of benefit were \$10, the assessment amount for each parcel containing one single family residence would be \$40 (Single Family Residential –Improved = 4 units of benefit per parcel x \$10 = \$40) and the assessment for an office building would be \$400.