



City of Sebastopol

THE FUTURE OF FIRE AND EMERGENCY SERVICES IN SEBASTOPOL. FAQ TO ADDRESS QUESTIONS PRESENTED BY THE PUBLIC TO THE AD HOC FIRE COMMITTEE. (Answers as of October 7, 2022)

The Sebastopol City Council's Ad Hoc Fire Committee has been presented with many questions regarding the process being undertaken and the plans being developed for the future of fire and emergency services in Sebastopol. This FAQ is a compilation of all those questions, with complete and factual answers that we hope will help inform our community on this very important issue.

*This FAQ is available on the City's website. A downloadable printable PDF is included. The version on the City's website has hyperlinks to the documents and websites mentioned. To reach the City website location, please go the [City's homepage](#) and enter "**Fire Services Delivery Study**" in the search bar. The Fire Delivery Study is a Project of the City Council.*

1. Question: Why is the City Council investigating how best to deliver fire and emergency services to the residents of Sebastopol?

Answer: While the City of Sebastopol evaluates its emergency and disaster planning and procedures on an ongoing basis, the impact of recent wildfire events has forced us to prioritize planning for the future of fire services in our community. The 2017 fire event in Sonoma and Napa Counties made this concern particularly acute, and motivated the City Council to establish committees to review City emergency disaster procedures. Since 2017, stabilizing the future of Sebastopol fire and emergency services has been a priority for the City Council and for City Staff, including the Fire Chief, who has been an active participant on all committees addressing this issue.

It is critical that we plan for the future, recognizing and addressing the realities of our situation; an older population, increasing costs for maintaining and purchasing equipment, and facilities that need improvements. It's an important enough issue that the City has contracted with an outside agency that has expertise on fire service issues to assess the situation and provide recommendations to allow the City to plan for the future in terms of infrastructure and funding. The company is [MATRIX Consulting](#), a firm that has worked with over 150 fire/EMS agencies conducting studies of staffing, management, standard of coverage, and feasibility studies, among others. MATRIX was selected to specifically consider two options for Sebastopol: continuation of an independent fire house, and consolidation with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, but have been asked to also consider and recommend any other approach they conclude could be feasible for fire services in Sebastopol.

The City Council has always kept this question at the forefront of this work: How do we deliver the best possible fire and emergency service to the residents of Sebastopol?

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

2. Question: How is the Fire Department currently funded? Do we need more funding? Or replacement funding?

Answer: This year, City funding for our Fire Department is \$1.4 million from the General Fund, which are funds available to the City for general use for providing services to the residents of Sebastopol. There is no plan to eliminate or reduce funding for the Fire Department, whether the decision is to pursue consolidation or to maintain an independent Fire Department. It is already generally agreed that the amount needed annually by our Fire Department is substantially more than the \$1.4 million in the City budget this fiscal year, and may be an additional \$1 million or more. MATRIX Consulting is identifying the amount of the additional funding needed, and is studying ways to supplement our current funding. This additional funding is not available in our City budget. For details, please see [the City's approved budget for 2022-23](#). The document lists revenue and expenses. It shows that the City does not have any "extra" funds, certainly not enough to reliably allocate substantial additional funding for our Fire Department, or for any other purpose. Even shifting funds from other City needs would be problematic because this would create deficits in essential services for many other City departments. The Fire Department budget is located at [page 101 of the 2022-23 Budget](#). The amount allocated for the Fire Department this year (approximately \$1.4 million in City funding) is in line with spending by the Fire Department last year, which was \$1.3 million plus approximately \$400,000 to purchase a fire truck. It is important to note that significant cost savings were realized by purchasing the fire truck outright, rather than financing it.

3. Question: What are the City budget implications of consolidation or retaining an independent Fire Department? Will either one mean the City won't have to continue to fund the Fire Department?

Answer: Please see the answer to Question 2. Whether the decision is to pursue consolidation or maintain an independent Fire Department (or select some other course), current City funding will need to continue and will need to be supplemented for Sebastopol's residents to have the assurance of quality services in the future.

4. Question: Who is on the "Ad Hoc Fire Committee?"

Answer: The current Committee (which has been in place since December of 2020) consists of two City Council appointed Liaisons: Mayor Patrick Slayter and Councilmember Diana Rich, plus City staff: City Manager Larry McLaughlin, Asst City Manager Mary Gourley, and Fire Chief Bill Braga.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

5. Question: When did the Ad Hoc Fire Committee report on its activities? Where can I find those reports? Please summarize very briefly the formal reports and the City Council's actions.

Answer: The most recent history involves the current Ad Hoc Fire Committee, which made formal reports to the City Council on May 18, 2021, May 17, 2022, and on August 2, 2022.

[The Ad Hoc Fire Committee's May 18, 2021 Report](#) presented an overview of the various options being considered for the future of the Fire Department. At this time, the Committee informed the City Council that it expected its inquiry would be broad and would include the consideration of a variety of options, including among them continued operation of the fire department by the City and possible consolidation with another fire district. The City Council directed the Ad Hoc Committee to inquire into all options.

[The Ad Hoc Fire Committee's May 17, 2022 Report](#) presented the results of its work and recommended that the City Council pursue consolidation. The City Council felt it did not have enough information to make a decision about consolidation, and instead directed that a neutral independent study by an expert in fire services be arranged to investigate all available options.

[The Ad Hoc Fire Committee's August 2, 2022 Report](#) to the City Council provided the proposals of the two consultants that had submitted applications to perform the study requested by the City Council. At the August 2, 2022, meeting the City Council approved the contract with MATRIX Consulting, as recommended by the Ad Hoc Fire Committee.

6. Question: How much time has the Ad Hoc Committee spent investigating the options for the Fire Department? Has this been a thorough process?

Answer: Maintenance and improvement of fire and emergency services for Sebastopol residents has always been a concern for City leadership. The concern became more acute in the wake of the 2017 fire event in Sonoma and Napa counties, and resulted in the establishment of City Council committees to focus on specific fire and emergency services issues. The current Ad Hoc Committee has been in place since December of 2020. Looking at recent meeting history, between February of 2021 and May of 2022, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee held sixteen meetings, including working meetings of the full Ad Hoc Committee, focused outreach meetings with other fire districts and with LAFCO (Local Agency Formation Commission), and meetings specifically with our Sebastopol volunteer firefighters. Committee members also engaged in research and preparation during this period. Between May and August of 2022, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee met formally six times. They also spent substantial additional time between meetings on the tasks created and issues raised by the City Council's request that the Ad Hoc Committee identify a qualified independent, neutral consultant to make recommendations on the future of fire services in Sebastopol. Since August 2, 2022, the Committee has continued to meet and continued necessary additional work outside those meetings, with the focus being on (1) ensuring MATRIX has access to complete and accurate information about City and Fire Department finances, policies, and any other information requested by MATRIX, and (2) making sure MATRIX has the necessary support and information to complete the necessary interviews and outreach to complete the study.

The contract between the City of Sebastopol and MATRIX was approved at the [August 2, 2022 regular City Council meeting](#). [The Ad Hoc Committee's August 2, 2022 Staff Report](#) includes MATRIX's proposal ([Exhibit D at page 33](#)) and the contract with MATRIX ([Exhibit E at page 106](#)) that was approved by the full City Council. The contract specifically directs MATRIX to focus its evaluation on (1) retention of City of Sebastopol Volunteer Fire Department with Conversion to 24/7 Staffing Model and (2) Consolidation of City of Sebastopol Volunteer Fire Department with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District ([page 116 of the Staff Report](#), where the contract describes the Scope of Work).

The bottom line is that the process has been, and is continuing to be, thorough.

[Please go to this link on the City’s website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for “Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

7. Question: Has the Fire Department been represented or involved in the meetings that have been held so far?

Answer: Yes, the Sebastopol Volunteer Fire Department has been represented and involved in the meetings so far. The Sebastopol Fire Department is staffed by a full-time Fire Chief, 1 full-time 40-hour Fire Engineer and volunteer stipended firefighters. This group has been represented by the Fire Chief, who was a member of the original committees formed in 2017, as well as the most recent Ad Hoc Fire Committee. The Fire Chief has attended the Ad Hoc Fire Committee’s meetings and contributed to its work. The Ad Hoc Fire Committee has had two formal meetings with the firefighters as a group. The first was in April of 2021, and the second was in May of 2022. In addition, City management had an initial group meeting with all volunteers (including volunteer leadership) in attendance at a weekly drill night, and also received at another meeting a slide show presentation from volunteer leadership. MATRIX Consulting is meeting with the volunteer firefighters, including their leadership (captains, administrative captains, and the fire training officer) to get their input and ideas about the best way to ensure the future of the Fire Department.

8. Question: Is Sebastopol’s Fire Department already being consolidated with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District or any other Fire Department?

Answer: No, there is no consolidation of any kind underway. As has been done in many other parts of Sonoma County, the City of Sebastopol has retained a company to provide a neutral and unbiased opinion on the best available options for the future of fire services in Sebastopol. The name of the company is MATRIX Consulting. MATRIX will consider two primary options (as well as any others they conclude are should be recommended): retaining an independent fire station and consolidation with Gold Ride Fire Protection District. The report from MATRIX has not yet been received, and no decision regarding changes in the Fire Department have been made. MATRIX’s report is expected by the end of November.

Once MATRIX has completed its study, it will be presented at a public noticed meeting, so the community and the City Council can be fully informed of the results and the Council can consider the recommendations and make a decision about the best way to move forward to ensure the future of fire and emergency services.

9. Question: Since Chief Braga is retiring this December, who will be the next chief?

Answer: The City Manager, as the City Personnel Officer, is responsible for Recruitment and Retention of Department Directors. Upon receipt of Chief Braga’s official retirement notice, the City Manager began reviewing all options for providing the future leadership for the Fire Department. That leadership decision has not yet been made, but will be in place prior to the retirement date for Chief Braga.

[Please go to this link on the City’s website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for “Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

10. Question: Was there a recommendation by the Ad Hoc Fire Committee that our fire services be consolidated with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District? What was the outcome of that recommendation?

Answer: Yes, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee did make the consolidation recommendation in May of this year (at the May 17, 2022, City Council meeting) but the full City Council felt it needed additional information before a final decision could be made. The City Council directed that an outside consultant be retained to provide a neutral, unbiased assessment and make recommendations as to the best way to ensure the future of fire services in Sebastopol. The contract with MATRIX Consulting to complete that study was approved at the August 2, 2022 City Council meeting. The contract directs MATRIX to consider both continuation of a Sebastopol Fire Department and consolidation with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District, as well as any other recommendations MATRIX concludes are best for the City. The City Council is waiting to review the recommendations from MATRIX. That study is expected to be submitted in November 2022. See also answer to Question 8.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

11. Question: Will the City be reaching out to the community to get input on the future of the Sebastopol Fire Department? Will there be future City Council meetings where the community can weigh in on the Fire Department's future? Will there be a Town Hall?

Answer: Yes, community input on the future of the Fire Department is very important. MATRIX Consulting, the company retained to provide recommendations about the future of fire services in Sebastopol, has reached out and interviewed stakeholders in the community. That has included a variety of community members as well as the Fire Chief, Fire Engineer, Key Volunteer Fire Management, and volunteer firefighters. The information collected will include input on all the options, including retaining an independent Fire Department and consolidating with Gold Ridge Fire Protection District. Those interviews will help inform the recommendations from MATRIX to the City Council. There will also be City Council meetings where the future of the Fire Department will be on the agenda. Additionally, when this topic is not on the agenda, members of the public can comment during the time for "public comment on items not on the agenda." Email comments can be sent to citycouncil@cityofsebastopol.org. The City Council has already received significant community input on the Fire Department's future, at past City Council meetings and via emails and phone calls. The City Council will take all of this community input into consideration in making a decision on the future of the Fire Department. Finally, there will be a Town Hall held for the benefit of the community.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

12. Question: Is the Ad Hoc Fire Committee and the City Council aware of the concerns of the firefighters? What is being done to address those concerns?

Answer: Yes, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee and the City Council are aware of firefighter concerns. They were conveyed to the Ad Hoc Fire Committee at the April 2021 and May 2022 meetings between the Ad Hoc Committee and the firefighters, and by the Fire Chief at Ad Hoc Fire Committee meetings. Volunteer leadership also met directly with City staff to discuss the needs of the Fire Department. These concerns have been conveyed to the full City Council in numerous communications during and between City Council meetings. MATRIX Consulting has met with key volunteer fire department volunteers, including their leadership, and will consider

their concerns and input when it produces its assessment and recommendations for the City Council.

It is important to remember that the underlying reason for this work is to determine how best to provide adequate and appropriate fire and emergency services to the residents of Sebastopol. Until the analysis is accomplished and presented, the Ad Hoc Fire Committee suggests keeping an open mind.

13. Question: Was the May 17, 2022, agenda item about possible consolidation publicly noticed? How can residents find out when the Fire Department is being discussed by the City Council?

Answer: Yes, every City Council discussion about the Fire Department has been publicly noticed. The [May 18, 2021 Report by the Ad Hoc Committee is on that agenda as item 15](#). The [May 17, 2022 Report by the Ad Hoc Committee is on that agenda as item 7](#), and the [August 2, 2022 Report by the Ad Hoc Committee is on that agenda as item 7](#). These and all other agendas and related staff reports are available to the public, and are posted on the City's website the week before each City Council meeting. Anyone can subscribe to receive a notice as soon as agendas and related staff reports are posted.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study.](#)

A review of the agenda for each meeting will disclose the exact topics to be discussed, in the order they can be expected to be addressed. That is true with all City Council items, and was the case with the reports made to the City Council regarding the Fire Department.

14. Question: If consolidation is pursued, will it include a parcel tax for Sebastopol's property owners? If so, what will be the process for Sebastopol property owners?

Answer: Consolidation is not being pursued at this time. The City Council is waiting to review the report from MATRIX Consulting before making any decision about changes to the Fire Department. If consolidation is pursued, the existing parcel tax for all Gold Ridge Fire Protection District parcels would apply to Sebastopol. The current Gold Ridge Fire Protection District parcel tax for residential landowners is \$265 per parcel, plus \$100 for each additional unit on that parcel. The MATRIX Consulting study will include details about the process that would be followed regarding extension of the parcel tax to Sebastopol properties.

15. Question: If the City Council decides to retain an independent Fire Department, how will it be funded? Will taxpayers be expected to cover the costs?

Answer: The City Council is waiting to review the report from MATRIX Consulting before making any decision about changes to the Fire Department. To the extent the avenue pursued is continuation of an independent fire department, MATRIX has been asked to include funding options and recommendations. The current funding for the Fire Department is insufficient to ensure future quality services or improvements to the current Sebastopol fire station, and that funding will likely have to be supplemented by additional funding. One possible source of that additional funding would be a new tax on residents of Sebastopol. The amount of this potential new tax to support a continuation of an independent fire department, and how it would compare to the parcel tax applicable in the event of a consolidation, is a question MATRIX Consulting has been asked to address.

16. Question: Is the City Council planning on closing the Sebastopol Fire Department and instead having fire services dispatched out of the Gold Ridge Fire Department?

Answer: No, the City Council has no plans to close the Sebastopol Fire Department, whether the decision is to pursue consolidation or maintain an independent Fire Department.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study."](#)

17. Question: When will the City of Sebastopol's Emergency Operations Plan be finalized?

Answer: The City Council reviewed the Fire Chief's draft Emergency Operations Plan in March 2022 and requested the Chief make changes and finalize it for approval by the Fire Department. The Fire Chief expects to return the final to the City Council at the November 15, 2022 City Council meeting. For the draft Emergency Operations Plan please [see item 14 on the March 15, 2022 City Council agenda.](#)

18. Question: What is the process moving forward? When will residents know what is going to happen with fire services in Sebastopol?

Answer: This is our best projection in terms of a timeline at this point: We expect the MATRIX report will be received in November, and the results will be discussed at one or more publicly noticed City Council meetings. A decision regarding the future of the Fire Department will likely be made by early 2023 and potential changes would be implemented by the end of 2023. If consolidation is not pursued, the City Council will likely be discussing property tax or other reliable funding to provide adequate future fire and emergency services to the residents of Sebastopol. A Town Hall is planned as part of the process of community engagement. For MATRIX's anticipated timeline, please see [page 68 in the August 2 Staff Report.](#) Please keep in mind that this is our best estimate, and the timing could be changed by a number of factors.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study."](#)

19. Question: How much compensation do firefighters receive?

Answer: All volunteer firefighters receive compensation from the City of Sebastopol, in the form of stipends for daytime 8-hour shifts (7am-4pm, seven days a week), for weekend or holiday stand-by, for responding to calls, for participating in trainings, plus additional amounts for retention and service awards. The daytime shift stipend is for volunteers who remain on-site at the Fire House for an 8-hour shift (one per day, each day of the week, 7am-4pm). Weekend or holiday stand-by is for captain-level volunteers who respond from home. At night, there is no volunteer on-site presence at the Fire House, with volunteers responding as they are able from their homes. Stipends for responding to calls are paid whether or not the volunteer has signed up to cover a shift. Total time commitment and stipends for any one firefighter varies, depending on their availability for daytime shifts, weekend and holiday stand-by shifts, and calls. As an example, some firefighters schedule themselves for one daytime 8-hour shift per month, while others schedule themselves for four to six per month. In addition to stipend pay from the City's general fund, volunteer firefighters receive compensation from outside agencies when they respond to calls from those agencies (such as California Office of Emergency Services). The City advances those amounts to the firefighters, and then receives reimbursement at a later date from the outside agency.

Sebastopol's compensation to volunteer firefighters for the last three full years:

- \$292,468 in 2021, \$146 to \$33,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$11,000+ each
- \$349,946 in 2020, \$28 to \$32,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$12,000+ each
- \$349,413 in 2019, \$415 to \$27,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$11,000+ each

For Jan-Sep 2022, \$268,104 has been paid to date directly out of Sebastopol's budget, \$72 to \$30,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$10,000+ each as of this report. This does not include October, November or December 2022

Outside agency compensation to volunteer firefighters for the last three full years:

- \$267,800 in 2021, \$4600+ to \$63,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$29,000+ each
- \$280,021 in 2020, \$900 to \$59,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$18,000+ each
- \$146,685 in 2019, \$1800 to \$41,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$10,000+ each

For Jan-Sep 2022, \$97,845 has been paid to date in outside agency compensation, \$14,000+ to \$24,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$19,000+ each as of this report. This does not include October, November or December 2022.

The total number of volunteers who respond to calls from outside agencies varies from year to year. In 2019 there were 14. In 2020 there were 15. In 2021 there were 9. In 2022 (so far) there have been 5.

Total combined compensation to volunteer firefighters for the last three full years:

- \$560,268 in 2021, \$146 to \$80,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$22,000+ each
- \$629,967 in 2020, \$28 to \$74,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$22,000+ each
- \$496,098 in 2019, \$415 to \$51,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$16,000+ each

For Jan-Sep 2022, \$365,949 has been paid to date in total combined compensation, \$72 to \$52,000+ per volunteer, an average of \$14,000+ each as of this report. This does not include October, November or December 2022.

The Transparent California website at www.transparentcalifornia.com is an excellent source of information on this subject. It is an independently maintained database and is currently updated through 2020. To get the firefighter compensation information, go to the landing page and scroll down to "View salary records by agency type" and select "Cities," then "Sebastopol." Enter "firefighter" in the search bar to indicate the position category.

[Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study."](#)

20. Question: Why was Gold Ridge Fire Protection District identified as a possible consolidation partner?

Answer: Note that consolidation is not being pursued at this time. The City Council is waiting to review the report from MATRIX Consulting before making any decision about changes to the Fire Department. Consolidation with the Gold Ridge Fire Protection is one option being investigated by MATRIX, as well as retention of an independent fire department and any other options MATRIX recommends to the City Council. The Gold Ridge Fire Protection District was proposed as one of the options because it can provide the infrastructure needed to efficiently and effectively implement an increased staffing model in Sebastopol, has a culture that values

volunteers, already has an existing relationship with our Fire Department and our community, and has declared a willingness to work with us to negotiate a consolidation that will accommodate our City's needs. Additionally, Gold Ridge Fire Protection District has indicated an openness (subject to negotiation, of course) to grant Sebastopol a position on its Board, which would provide Sebastopol with a means to participate in decisions affecting Sebastopol fire services into the future. Please see the [May 17, 2022 Staff Report](#) for details.

21. Question: What impact would consolidation have on homeowner insurance rates for Sebastopol residents?

Answer: Note that consolidation is not being pursued at this time. The City Council is waiting to review the report from MATRIX Consulting before making any decision about changes to the Fire Department. Insurance companies use data provided by a variety of sources to set insurance rates. As we have seen recently statewide, property owners in areas with high fire risks have seen increases in insurance rates, requiring the State Insurance Commission to take action. Sebastopol has enjoyed very positive ratings by these independent rating entities (some are non-profit, others are for-profit) and insurance companies have recognized the quality of Sebastopol's fire services, as is evidenced by low fire insurance rates. Consolidation, if it is the direction chosen, would change nothing about the existing infrastructure that the rating companies analyze: the centrally located fire station would not move (it would actually be improved) and the comprehensive hydrant network would remain in place, fed by Sebastopol's reliable water delivery system. It is very likely that the changes would improve Sebastopol's ratings due to the faster response allowed by 24/7 firehouse staffing and the additional resources devoted to equipment and apparatus improvements.

22. Question: How can members of the public weigh in on this subject?

- Sign up to receive email notices whenever a City Council agenda and related documents are posted. [Please go to this link on the City's website to sign up to receive meeting notices. Select the option for "Fire Services Delivery Study."](#)
- Attend City Council meetings where the fire department issues are on the agenda.
- If you attend City Council meetings where the fire department issues are not on the agenda, offer your input during the time for "public comment on items not on the agenda."
- Email your input to citycouncil@cityofsebastopol.org.

Document Links:

- [May 18, 2021 Agenda](#)
- [Mar 15, 2022 City Council meeting](#)
- [May 18, 2021 Staff Report](#)
- [May 17, 2022 Agenda](#)
- [May 17, 2022 Staff Report](#)
- [Aug 2, 2022 Agenda](#)
- [Aug 2, 2022 Staff Report with attached contract with MATRIX Consulting](#)

[2021-2022 City of Sebastopol Approved Budget](#)