

FIRE SERVICES ISSUES & SOLUTIONS (November 2017)

The Fire Services Issue with Reno & Washoe County is complicated. For many years to 2012, Reno Fire (RFD) provided fire services/ emergency medical response but not ambulance to much of populated Washoe County.

Some was provided by others: NDF, Tahoe Fire, Airport, other Washoe areas, etc. Sparks has their own department. Some of Washoe was provided by Sierra Fire. In 2012 Washoe County essentially opted to cancel their contract with Reno due mainly to costs. They then essentially merged Sierra Fire with what is now called Truckee Meadows Fire Protection District (TM).

In 2011 and again in 2012, running thru June 2014 Reno applied for federal grants known as SAFER under the joint names and based the applications on the expanded population and size of Washoe; 6000 sq mi while Reno is 100 sq mi. After the split and after getting the grant Reno canceled automatic aid with Washoe and refused to share any of the grant.

Having gone their separate ways, most residents of Washoe seemed happy with TM services which had 3 person crews and paramedics. RFD requires 4 person crews and does not 100% staffed paramedics. The vast majority of calls are medical/ accident in nature with few fires and even fewer structure fires.

With no Automatic Aid emergency response was delayed.

For example right by Boomtown Casino (Reno) is a TM fire station but they were not sent to calls there. Instead the closest RFD would be sent from miles away, and still not sent on medical calls. The Walmart center at Damonte Ranch has a TM station right there but it is City of Reno. Again, Washoe County was agreeable to Automatic Aid, it was a Reno decision.

In 2015 the legislature timidly stepped in and mandated Auto Aid only for Fire calls, not the 95% + of other calls.

Meantime due to financial issues, Reno closed two fire stations #19 Somersett and #7 Skyline- even on red flag danger days.

Washoe organized a "Blue Ribbon" committee to look at fire services but Reno refused to join in. In April, 2014, it was discovered that Reno did not get a follow on grant and they announced the lay-off of 35 more firefighters and they approached Washoe- hat in hand so to speak- to discuss re-consolidation. At a Washoe hearing, it was evident there was no interest in that and Automatic Aid had to be restored first. A thought is why doesn't Washoe- TM bid to take over Reno services this time. What if they can do it better and cheaper?

The Blue Ribbon Report was largely ignored.

So persons looking at Reno Fire (RFD) should consider the following:

1. Reno career firefighters may be among the HIGHEST compensated of any firefighters nationwide (lots of documentation on request).
2. Reno canceled Automatic Aid with Washoe and houses burned and medical response was delayed.
3. Reno Contract PROHIBITS the use of volunteers in Reno! A volunteer at The Mizpah Fire was reportedly ordered to leave. The RFD (IAFF) union filed a formal grievance to enforce the prohibition on volunteers.
4. Sparks and Truckee Meadows Fire and most others operate with three person crews except for Reno.
5. When a Reno crew member takes a day off and no back fill available the perfectly good 3 person crew, by contract, is pulled from the station and station closed! This is insanity.
6. By contract RFD is the sole primary provider of fire services- possibly even prohibiting Automatic Aid.
7. Reno is broke and it is the highest taxed in the state.
8. TMFPD is also represented by union has wide community support and staffs its crews with paramedics which Reno does not. TM has volunteers but they can't enter Reno. We support the TM Union and are not anti-labor!
9. The vast majority of calls are not fire but medical/accident related.
10. Why doesn't Reno ask Truckee Meadows/ Washoe to bid on providing Fire rather than visa versa?
11. The outrageous Reno FD/ IAFF contract is a must read but be seated! -The Reno fiscal problems, staffing, taxation and labor issues are too lengthy and complex to deal with here but it's out of control bested only by the dysfunction and over spending at the Washoe County School District, but that's another story.

TAXATION: Reno is the highest taxed local government in the state. It is taxed at the maximum property tax rate allowed by law and even higher in the Downtown Tax District with both a Special Police Dist and Trench "tax" which may be illegal. Not just property tax but gas prices are about 40 cents per gallon higher than in Fernley & Douglas County even though the gas comes from Sparks. Washoe sales tax highest in state at 8.265%?

FIRE ISSUES: BROWN OUTS & FIRE RESPONSE: If there was ever an example of INSANITY it is found in Reno-Washoe fire and medical response services.

Washoe has agreed to come to the table but Reno drags their feet. As mentioned the Blue Ribbon Report has been locked away and largely ignored.

Recently Reno firefighters received a massive pay raise but closed some stations (Sommerset & Skyline) and staffing was reduced.

SOLUTIONS (YES VIRGINIA THERE ARE SOLUTIONS)

MEDIATION & PROBLEM SOLVING: Reno and Washoe should use mediation or even a BRAC form* of binding problem solving.

GET A BID FROM WASHOE: A good option is contracted services, generally with Washoe County. Let Reno FD and TMFPD both bid to provide area services. I'd let the state (NDF) bid too!

REGIONALIZATION: Let's include consideration of NDF, Carson City, Storey, etc... Are there services that could be shared or contracted? Would NDF bid for services?

LEGAL: Obtain legal opinions as discussed.

LEGISLATIVE SOLUTIONS: Many of the solutions may only be available via changes in the labor laws at the state level.

LABOR CONTRACTS: Address runaway labor contracts. Establish fire contracts that allow Reno to determine allocation of resources and automatic aid and coverage. Volunteers are prohibited under contract- this must be changed. To receive more SAFER grants, one criteria is use of volunteers! Give in to the IAFF demand for 4 person crews but allow leeway in back filling positions when crew strength falls to three due to sick, vacation or other leave.

TRANSPARENCY: Hold open Finance and NAB (Neighborhood Advisory Boards) or other hearings to allow citizen review of labor contracts.

USE PAID RESERVES: Fire staffing can be met by the use of paid Reserve firefighters (FFs). All being fully certified, many being retirees or even current FFs from nearby agencies. For example many NFD or other county FFs would jump at the chance to earn extra income, gain experience and get their foot in the door with higher paid Reno. They would still be- if they desire- union members and covered by union contract. This is not an attempt to eliminate collective bargaining, just to save taxpayer money. Again, we are not antiunion. These part time employees would be union represented for pay and benefits.

NO FIRE ACADEMY NEEDED: Hire fully qualified fire fighters or eliminating the need for expensive academies and drop outs. Reno should only hire these fully qualified FFs providing a short in-house refresher Reno specific academy. For reasons I can explain there is a glut of such personnel available.

JUDICIAL REVIEW: Some person or group may have to step forward to seek Judicial review of some of these laws and contracts to see if they are compliant with existing state laws and public policy and Nevada Constitution.

*BRAC involves a non-elected committee to form recommendations that the elected bodies vote up or down without amendment or not voting. This was also the stated intent of the Simpson-Bowes Commission.

Jeff Church
www.RenoTaxRevolt.com