

Joint Response to San Miguel Fire District Recall Notice

The basis of this recall simply is not true. The allegations listed in the Notice of Intention are intentionally false and misleading. We do not believe this is the fault of all proponents who signed the Notice, but due to CalFire Union leaders and others intentionally manipulating these individuals through lies and deceit. We are grateful that one of the proponents is gracious enough to meet with one of us to hear both sides, and welcome the opportunity to meet with any and all of the other proponents as well.

This recall is nothing more than a last-ditch effort by the State of California/CalFire to keep control of this Fire District and the lucrative contract that goes with it. Sadly, according to the Registrar of Voters, this recall effort, if it continues, is expected to cost the District's taxpayers at least \$650,000 but probably more, simply to cover the cost of a Special Election.

The Citizens of the San Miguel Fire District voted us into office because we pledged to return this Fire District to Local Control to keep taxpayer dollars in this District and ensure the best emergency response service available. We stood by our word.

We have worked very hard over the past two years analyzing the District's finances. Our Board worked for months with our Chief Financial Officer and conducted an in-depth analysis, (also referred to as a "micro-study"), to determine the cost of returning the function of fire suppression and emergency services to the District. The result was that, by returning to a stand-alone agency, (rather than continuing the costly contract with CalFire), the District would save just under \$1.5 million in the first year alone^[1].

This analysis is continually attacked and alleged to be inaccurate by those wanting CalFire to remain in control of fire suppression services in our District. The analysis is 100% accurate and to suggest otherwise is not only deceptive, it's ludicrous.

Think of the micro-study simply as a line item in our overall budget that represents what it would cost – in *addition* to the existing budget – to return to a stand-alone agency. The budget itself includes worker's compensation costs and other costs that our opponents allege are "missing" from the analysis.

While it is true we voted not to obtain an outside review of this budget line item, it was because we were fortunate enough to have one of, if not, the best Chief Finance Officers in the business, (with more than 30 years of experience with complex fire district budgets), assist the Board in preparing the study. We did not see a need to expend \$40,000 to \$60,000 of taxpayer money simply to tell us her numbers are right.

It is important to note; the District did not do an independent study before signing the existing \$68 million contract with CalFire. Because of that Contract, and long before we were elected, the District paid an additional \$3.4 million in costs directly related to transitioning its fire suppression function to the State of California. The move to CalFire has proven to be an egregious financial mistake and a fiscally irresponsible decision by a prior Board.

We voted to cancel the contract with CalFire prior to the expiration date because doing so would save the taxpayers of this District \$1.5 million in the first year alone (i.e., over \$100,000 each month). In subsequent years, the projected savings will be far more substantial.

The reason it is less costly to return to a stand-alone agency is because CalFire's costs for labor and benefits are rapidly increasing, and those costs would be passed on to the District's taxpayers with a 12.79% Administrative Fee tacked on to it. The District has absolutely no control over pay raises received by the State's CalFire employees since we do not have any say in their negotiations.

We know that CalFire firefighters will be receiving a 24% pay raise over the next 3 years, and that cost would also be passed on to the District.

Based on the financial information before us, it was not a question of *if* we could afford to go back to a stand-alone agency, but rather knowing *we cannot afford* to continue our contract with CalFire due to the ongoing escalation of costs surrounding labor and benefit costs. It really is that simple.

The allegations surrounding our vote to send a Letter of Intent to Heartland Communications Fire Authority ("HCFA") are false and a blatant misrepresentation of fact. As clearly stated in HCFA's Estimated Service Costs for our District, the total one-time start-up cost (listed as "buy-in cost") is \$76,684. That amount is scheduled to be negotiated on January 31, 2017.

Proponents falsely list the "start-up cost" as \$867,506 in their effort to incite voters to act against us. The estimated yearly cost for HCFA Dispatching Services (which includes a lot more District-specific needs and services than CalFire provides), is \$787,440.

Some relevant history surrounding the allegations of this recall effort are important to make public.

The Board was told by CalFire Chief Darrin Howell that CalFire could not provide the Board with an estimate of costs for CalFire's dispatch services without a formal Request for Proposal ("RFP"). In order to prepare a formal RFP, (contrary to what proponents allege to be a "free quote"), the District would have to pay someone to prepare the RFP. An RFP is a very detailed, time-consuming, and costly document to prepare. Five Board members voted to forego the cost of an RFP because all know HCFA provides services more specific to our District's 911 dispatching needs.

In July, 2016, a cost estimate was obtained from HCFA, publicly disclosing their July 26, 2016 yearly cost estimate of \$717,854 (based on a call volume of CalFire's alleged count of 11,327). Once HCFA's bid was made public, CalFire suddenly decided to submit their own estimate without an RFP, thus giving CalFire the clear advantage to underbid HCFA.

In order to bring any matter before the Board again for reconsideration, there must be new information that the Board should consider; CalFire's Chief Officer know this.

At the January 11, 2017, Board meeting, CalFire Chief Howell reported for the first time, that the number of calls previously reported to our Board by CalFire over the previous two years, were incorrect. The correct count, he now alleges, is 12,558. Not only did this alleged increase in call volume cause the need for HCFA to increase their yearly cost estimate to \$787,440, it was designed to provide CalFire the opportunity to underbid the HCFA estimate.

This manipulative tactic of getting HCFA to show their hand before CalFire put their hat in the ring, was intentionally orchestrated to give CalFire the “low-bid” advantage in an apples-to-oranges comparison, and give their Union fodder for a recall.

Regardless of cost, the Board, by District Policy, is guided to ensure the “taxpayers are receiving the best product for the funds expended by the District”. With that in mind, the Board had lengthy discussions during both its December 14, 2016 and January 11, 2017 regular Board meetings regarding the specific needs of the District and the different services offered by both HCFA and CalFire.

We would encourage all of our citizens and news reporters to listen to the audio of those two meetings and decide for yourself which agency you would want to Dispatch your 911 Emergency before you even consider signing a recall petition.

While acknowledging CalFire provides a full-service Command Center with dispatching capabilities, the Board determined the dedicated dispatch service provided by HCFA was the most appropriate fit for the District’s needs based on a number of significant factors; including response times and safety concerns.

Although the annual cost is slightly higher, the Board found the totality of the services provided by HCFA far outweighed the additional cost.

Worth noting, services provided by HCFA, but not offered by CalFire, include mobile computer software maps that help firefighters find the location of the 911 Emergency more quickly. It also provides software that allows our District to obtain our own call volume count directly from the database. Time and time again, CalFire has provided us with call volume numbers that cannot be verified.

Having CalFire dispatch our 911 calls from another Zone in the County, is like calling plays in a football game without being able to see the game. It increases the time it takes to process a 911 call, increases the chances for errors, and increases the risk to citizens and our firefighters.

Even CalFire’s San Diego Unit Chief Tony Mecham stated at our January 11, 2017, Board meeting, “there are operational advantages” to the District being dispatched by HCFA.

We voted to return to the HCFA dispatching service model because it had provided the citizens of our District with exceptional service for many years prior to the contract with CalFire. Further, we know from our own personal experience working as firefighters ourselves, that having the District utilize HCFA for its dispatching needs is absolutely the best service our citizens can get for the money expended.

Most of the proponents want the public to believe they are simply a concerned group of taxpayers when, in reality, all but one (that we know of) are family and friends of current CalFire employees using this recall as a personal vendetta.

The recall proponents are being encouraged by a very small minority of State of California-CalFire Union Local 2881's leadership – not the majority of firefighters themselves. In fact, many of the CalFire firefighters support the cancellation of the Contract and hope to secure jobs with the San Miguel Fire District upon its cancellation.

The CalFire Union leaders funded the last election and backed candidates who want CalFire in control of our District and, without a doubt, the CalFire Union Leaders are funding this recall effort as well.

They do not care about doing what is best for the Citizens and taxpayers of this District, but rather doing “whatever it takes” to keep the CalFire Contract in place, which is to the detriment of the those we were sworn to represent.

We respectfully request that our Citizens NOT support this recall effort nor sign any petition asking to recall us. We strongly encourage our Citizens to contact us directly with any questions they may have.

Sincerely,
Jim Ek
Mike Vacio
Theresa McKenna

[\[1\]](#) *San Miguel Consolidated Fire Protection District, Updated Micro-Study, July 6, 2016, “Cost of Returning Fire Suppression Function (Stand Alone Agency)”*