

RESPONSES TO GRAND JURY REPORT

Report Title: 2025–2026 Better Service at a Lower Cost: Optimizing Essential Services for the Future of Marin

Respondent/Agency Name: Southern Marin Fire Protection District

Your Name: Tom Welch

Title: Interim Fire Chief

FINDINGS:

I (we) agree with the findings numbered: **F1, F2, F3, F5**

I (we) disagree *partially* with the findings numbered: **F4, F6, F7, F8**

I (we) disagree *wholly* with the findings numbered:

(Attach a statement specifying any portions of the findings that are disputed; include an explanation of the reasons therefor.)

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendations numbered **R6, R7, R9** have been implemented.

(Attach a summary describing the implemented actions.)

Recommendations numbered _____ have not yet been implemented but will be implemented in the future.

(Attach a timeframe for the implementation.)

Recommendations numbered **R1, R2 R3, R8** require further analysis.

(Attached an explanation and the scope and parameters of an analysis or study, and a timeframe for the matter to be prepared for discussion by the officer or director of the agency or department being investigated or reviewed, including the governing body of the public agency when applicable. This timeframe shall not exceed six months from the date of the publication of the grand jury report.)

Recommendations numbered **R4, 45, R6** will not be implemented because they are not warranted or are not reasonable.

(Attach an explanation.)

Date: 8/26/26

Signed: _____



Tom Welch, Interim Fire Chief

Number of pages attached: 8



Southern Marin Fire Protection District

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August 26th, 2026

The Honorable Judge Stephen P. Freccero

Marin County Superior Court

P.O. Box 4988

San Rafael, CA 94913-4988

Re: Better Service at Lower Cost - Optimizing Essential Services for the Future of Marin

This is the official response of the Southern Marin Fire Protection District ("District" or "SMFPD") to the findings and recommendations of the Marin County Civil Grand Jury report titled "Better Service at Lower Cost - Optimizing Essential Services for the Future of Marin." This response was developed in consultation with our staff and approved by the Southern Marin Fire Protection District Board of Directors at its meeting on August 26th 2026.

Pursuant to California Penal Code section 933.05, the District responds to each finding and recommendation directed to it. The District's responses are informed by its own history of shared services, annexation, and consolidation. SMFPD was created through the merger of predecessor fire protection districts (Tamalpais Fire Protection District and the Alto-Richardson Bay Fire Protection District formed in 1999), later annexed the City of Sausalito's fire services, and completed the consolidation of the City of Mill Valley Fire Department into the District effective July 1, 2023. That experience supports thoughtful, locally evaluated reform while recognizing that governance, financing, labor, geography, and service-level considerations differ among agencies.

FINDINGS

F1. The current fragmented structure of special districts results in unnecessary duplication of administrative services and operational inefficiencies.

Response: Agree. Fragmented service delivery can create duplicative administrative systems, inconsistent practices, avoidable operational boundaries, and unnecessary costs. SMFPD's own history demonstrates that carefully planned shared services, annexation, consolidation, and regional partnerships can reduce duplication, improve coordination, and strengthen organizational capacity.

Consistent with the District's mission as it relates to consolidations: *SMFPD seeks to identify and implement programs, processes, and partnerships that result in cost savings or cost avoidance for participating organizations and all communities served; increase organizational efficiency; enhance firefighter and public safety; and strengthen mission resiliency through improved service delivery.*

The District also recognizes that fragmentation does not automatically establish inefficiency within every agency. The operational, financial, governance, and community circumstances of each district should be evaluated on their individual merits.

F2. Some districts perform competently but lack sufficient scale to support long-term strategic investment in infrastructure, technology, staffing, and resilience.

Response: Agree. A district may provide high-quality daily service while still lacking the financial or organizational scale needed for major capital investment, specialized staffing, technology, succession planning, and disaster resilience. This is why mutual aid and automatic aid systems exist. No one agency can handle all problems within their area, but together we can solve most any problems. SMFPD has found that greater scale can expand professional capacity and improve long-term planning, provided that consolidation is supported by sound financial analysis and preserves or improves local service levels.

F3. Smaller districts are disproportionately vulnerable to staffing disruptions and catastrophic events that could rapidly impair service delivery.

Response: Agree. Limited administrative depth, small specialty teams, narrow staffing margins, and limited opportunities for internal succession planning may increase vulnerability to vacancies, retirements, extended leave, simultaneous incidents, and large-scale emergencies. Smaller organizations may also face challenges developing and retaining qualified internal candidates for leadership and specialized positions, creating potential gaps in institutional knowledge, organizational continuity, and long-term resiliency.

Marin County's mutual-aid system is highly effective and represents a significant regional strength. Although the County is served by multiple independent fire agencies (cities and districts), those agencies train, communicate, and respond together as one unified fire service during major emergencies. When catastrophic incidents occur, jurisdictional boundaries become secondary to the common mission of protecting life, property, and the community. Personnel, apparatus, command resources, and specialized capabilities are rapidly shared and integrated, allowing the region to operate as one coordinated system.

This strong mutual-aid framework provides critical operational depth and surge capacity; however, it does not fully address the administrative, leadership, succession, and organizational challenges experienced by individual agencies. Durable shared-service and consolidation models can complement mutual aid by providing greater administrative capacity, broader leadership-development opportunities, increased redundancy, improved continuity, and stronger long-term service resiliency.

F4. Although consolidation is a popular idea among many elected board members, current governance structures, absence of board member term limits, and fear of loss of political influence discourage boards and administrators from initiating consolidation even when they recognize its benefits.

Response: Partially disagree. Governance interests and concerns regarding the perception of potential loss of local control may affect some consolidation discussions, but the District does not agree that board tenure or fear of diminished political influence is necessarily the principal barrier. In SMFPD's experience, the more significant challenges include reconciling revenue structures, liabilities, labor agreements, employee benefits, governance representation, service expectations, facilities, culture blending, and community identity.

When consolidation or shared-service proposals are developed correctly, elected officials are often able to recognize the long-term value of the proposed model and the benefits it may provide to their communities. Reaching that point may require an objective and comprehensive analysis, sometimes conducted by an independent third party, to evaluate costs, risks, service levels, governance options, implementation requirements, and anticipated outcomes. A transparent, fact-based process allows

board members and the public to move beyond perceptions and assess whether the proposal will improve service, strengthen organizational resiliency, enhance public safety, and provide measurable financial or operational benefits.

The District's Board and its municipal partners have demonstrated that elected officials can advance consolidation and shared-service initiatives when the analysis is credible, the process is inclusive, and the proposed change is shown to be in the public interest.

F5. Service and pricing inequities currently exist across Marin and may increase if consolidation and functional collaboration do not accelerate.

Response: Agree. Differences in tax bases, fees, service models, staffing, retirement systems and administrative capacity can produce meaningful variations in cost and service across jurisdictions. An important initial hurdle in consolidation and shared-service discussions is often the disparity among firefighter labor agreements. Differences in compensation, benefits, staffing requirements, leave provisions, seniority, promotional practices, and other negotiated terms can complicate cost comparisons and implementation planning.

These issues are significant but not necessarily insurmountable. With transparent financial analysis, early engagement with labor representatives, good-faith collective bargaining, and a carefully phased implementation plan, agencies can develop equitable transition strategies that protect employees while advancing the broader public interest. Functional collaboration, shared procurement, regional standards, and appropriate consolidation can then reduce unnecessary disparities and improve operational consistency.

At the same time, complete uniformity in pricing or service delivery is not always achievable or equitable because local risk, geography, revenue, labor obligations, and community service-level decisions differ.

F6. Performance metrics for essential, mission-specific services exist but they are not readily available and standardized, which prevents meaningful public comparison of district effectiveness and undermines accountability.

Response: Partially disagree. The District supports transparent, understandable, and mission-relevant performance reporting. For example, NFPA 1710 establishes recognized benchmarks for the organization and deployment of fire suppression, emergency medical, and special-operations services by career fire departments, including objectives related to call processing, turnout, travel time, arrival of the first unit, and assembly of an effective response force.

However, the existence of national standards does not mean that performance data is uniformly defined, collected, calculated, or publicly reported among agencies. NFPA 1710 should serve as an important benchmark, but not as the sole measure of an agency's effectiveness. Meaningful countywide comparisons must also account for differences in geography, population density, station distribution, call volume and type, deployment and staffing models, ambulance responsibilities, roadway access, wildfire exposure, and community service expectations.

Individual agencies should also periodically conduct comprehensive deployment and standards-of-cover analyses to evaluate community risk, resource distribution, staffing, response performance, and future service needs. These analyses should be presented to the governing board and used to establish formally adopted local standards, performance objectives, and reporting metrics. Board adoption promotes transparency, accountability, and a clear connection between community expectations, available resources, and the level of service the agency is expected to provide.

SMFPD currently publishes financial, governance, compensation, strategic-planning, and operational information, including response analytics. The District would support the development of common countywide definitions and reporting methodologies, aligned with locally adopted deployment standards, to improve transparency and allow the public to make accurate and meaningful comparisons among agencies.

F7. Without proactive reform, future consolidations are more likely to occur through crisis-driven intervention, resulting in greater disruption and higher costs.

Response: Partially disagree. Proactive evaluation allows agencies to address governance, finance, labor, facilities, service levels, and implementation planning before operational or fiscal distress limits available choices. SMFPD's phased use of shared services before formal consolidation illustrates the value of deliberate planning, labor agreements, public engagement, and measured implementation.

The consolidation of the Southern Marin Fire Protection District and the City of Mill Valley's fire services was not driven by financial distress, staffing failure, or an operational crisis. Both organizations entered the process from positions of relative financial and organizational strength, with established staffing, effective operations, and the ability to evaluate the proposal on equal footing. This allowed the parties to focus on the long-term public interest rather than respond under the pressure of an immediate emergency. The resulting consolidation improved service delivery, increased organizational and operational capacity, contained costs, and enhanced safety for both the public and fire-service personnel. The District's experience demonstrates that consolidation is most successful when it is undertaken proactively, supported by objective analysis, and implemented while participating agencies retain the time, resources, and flexibility necessary to make thoughtful decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. By January 1, 2027, all special district boards should have conducted their first semi-annual consolidation exploration meeting with similar districts and will have established a regular meeting schedule moving forward.

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis SMFPD has already completed extensive shared-service and consolidation analyses, including the July 1, 2023 consolidation with the Mill Valley Fire Department, and regularly collaborates with neighboring fire agencies. The District has also established a Board ad hoc Consolidation Committee whose ongoing purpose includes evaluating potential consolidation, annexation, shared-service, and regional partnership opportunities. This committee provides a structured forum for Board members to review emerging opportunities, consider operational and financial implications, and determine whether further analysis or formal Board consideration is warranted. Additional analysis is necessary to evaluate the workflows on limited resources to meet the specific date

R2. By October 1, 2026, the Board of Supervisors should direct the development of comprehensive, cost-efficient shared services (such as IT, legal, finance, HR/payroll, harmonized compensation/benefits package, insurance) for special districts to optimize expenses and secure a Marin-wide acceptable quality standard. First limited-service offerings are encouraged to be made available by January 1, 2027.

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis. The District supports the County's development of optional, competitively priced shared services when those services can demonstrate measurable value, appropriate service quality, clear accountability, and long-term financial

sustainability. Participation should remain voluntary and preserve each district's fiduciary responsibilities, labor obligations, data security, operational control, and ability to select the service model that best meets local needs.

The District is also concerned that a centralized countywide approach to information technology, legal services, finance, human resources and payroll, insurance, or harmonized compensation and benefit structures could unintentionally stifle smaller, locally developed efforts to improve efficiency among regional partners. Fire agencies and neighboring jurisdictions may be able to establish more responsive, flexible, and cost-effective shared-service arrangements based on geography, existing relationships, operational compatibility, and common service needs. A single countywide model should not displace or discourage these regional partnerships where they produce better outcomes.

Harmonized compensation and benefit structures also present significant legal, labor, and financial considerations and may not be practical across agencies with different revenue sources, bargaining agreements, pension obligations, staffing models, and community expectations. County-supported services should therefore supplement, rather than replace, regional collaboration and agency-specific solutions.

R3. By January 31, 2027, with the assistance of the County, all districts should develop and publish on their website standardized, comparable Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) with regard to service pricing, finance, staffing, operations, and customer satisfaction.

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis. SMFPD already publishes extensive financial, governance, compensation, strategic-planning, and operational information. By January 31, 2027, the District will review its existing public metrics against any County-developed framework (if available) and publish additional comparable KPIs that are reliable, meaningful to fire and emergency medical services, and reasonably available from District systems.

R4. By January 31, 2027, each district should publicly update findings and progress regarding consolidation opportunities, and share those findings with the Board of Supervisors and the public on a semi-annual basis.

Response: Will not be implemented. SMFPD's prior shared-service and consolidation work was conducted through public meetings, publicly available studies, LAFCo proceedings, and District communications. Current administrative workloads and staffing constraints make semi-annual public reporting on consolidation metrics operationally impractical.

R5. By January 31, 2027, the Board of Supervisors should oversee compliance with R1-R4 and update the public on the district's performance.

Response: Will not be implemented. This recommendation assigns responsibility to the Marin County Board of Supervisors and is outside the District's legal authority. SMFPD is an independent special district governed by its own Board of Directors. Except where expressly authorized by statute, agreement, or another applicable legal mechanism, the District cannot establish or assume a County oversight role, nor can it determine how the Board of Supervisors will monitor other independent agencies. California's local-government framework separately recognizes independent special districts and assigns responsibility for boundary changes, reorganizations, and related service reviews to the independent Local Agency Formation Commission process.

The District is also concerned that a centralized County compliance process could unintentionally stifle effective local and regional efforts. A uniform oversight structure, prescribed reporting schedule, or one-size-fits-all performance framework may redirect limited staff and Board capacity

away from promising partnerships among neighboring agencies that share geography, risks, operational systems, labor considerations, and service needs. It may also discourage flexible, incremental approaches, such as shared staffing, training, procurement, administration, or command services, that can establish trust and demonstrate value before agencies consider broader organizational changes.

Countywide transparency and coordination can be beneficial, but they should support rather than replace locally initiated collaboration, independent governance, and the established LAFCo process. The District will cooperate with lawful and appropriately scoped County requests for information, participate in regional discussions where they provide measurable value, and continue reporting publicly through its Board meetings, adopted policies, performance reporting, and transparency processes.

R6. By October 1, 2026, in the process of implementing R1 and R2, districts should prioritize functional consolidation in operations, procurement, training, and administration as a precursor to formal consolidation.

Response: The recommendation has been implemented. SMFPD has substantial experience using shared management, coordinated operations, common training, joint procurement, integrated fire-prevention functions, administrative support, and other functional partnerships before considering formal consolidation. These approaches helped the District and the City of Mill Valley identify benefits, risks, implementation requirements, and opportunities for improved service before completing their consolidation.

Conversations regarding operational coordination, procurement, training, administration, and other shared services occur routinely among Marin County's regional fire-service partners. These discussions are part of the agencies' daily working relationships and can progress incrementally when a proposed partnership is practical, beneficial, and supported by the participating organizations. Functional collaboration may serve as a pathway toward formal consolidation, but it can also remain an effective long-term arrangement when that structure best meets local and regional needs.

R7. By October 1, 2026, the district's board compensation, benefits, length of service, date of term end, and expenses related to board work should be clearly and prominently posted on each district's website and updated annually.

Response: The recommendation has been implemented. The District's Transparency webpages identify Board members, terms of office, compensation, and applicable reimbursement and compensation policies, and the District publishes annual Board compensation information. District staff will continue to review and update these materials to ensure the information remains clear, complete, and current.

R8. By June 1, 2027, special districts should adopt term limits of two consecutive four-year terms for all board members. Staggered implementation of term limits to avoid disruptions is encouraged.

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis. In principle, term limits can promote new perspectives, broaden community participation, and create regular opportunities for leadership renewal. However, the practical effects must be carefully considered. SMFPD Board members are elected at large for staggered four-year terms, and there have been periods when recruiting qualified and willing candidates for Board service has been difficult. In those circumstances, mandatory term limits could reduce the available pool of experienced candidates, create vacancies, and result in the loss of institutional knowledge at times when continuity is particularly important.

Board service requires a substantial understanding of public finance, labor relations, emergency-service delivery, regional governance, and the District's legal and fiduciary responsibilities. A fixed limit of two consecutive terms may therefore produce unintended consequences, particularly when there are few individuals prepared to assume those responsibilities.

R9. By June 1, 2027, board compensation structures should be reviewed across districts, and considered for adjustment. All components of board compensation should be posted on their website (see best practice example in Appendix B).

Response: The recommendation has been implemented. SMFPD reviews Board compensation through a public process and posts compensation information and related policies on its website. The District will continue its annual review and public reporting and will consider adjustments when supported by law, comparative data, fiscal conditions, and the responsibilities of Board service.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Clifford Waldeck". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Clifford Waldeck, President

Southern Marin Fire Protection District Board of Directors