

2005-2006 GRAND JURY REPORT

City of Blythe Volunteer Fire Department

Background

The City of Blythe Fire Department is a volunteer department with a Fire Chief who is compensated on a part-time basis. The Department has a roster of thirty-three volunteer firefighters, no full-time paid personnel, and an annual budget for 2005-06 of \$393,573.

The station is located in the downtown/core area. The Fire Department has eight officers who respond directly to the scene. Other firefighters respond to the station, obtain the fire apparatus and deliver it to the scene.

The City of Blythe Volunteer Fire Department (CBVFD) responds to structural fires, hazardous materials emergencies, smoke investigations and trash, vehicle and vegetation fires. The most common structural fire is a single-family dwelling or a small commercial business.

In order for the City of Blythe to annex unincorporated land, the Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) requires that the City contract with Riverside County for fire protection since the County provides a much higher level of service than the CBVFD.

The Riverside County Fire Department has two fire stations in the Blythe area and one in Ripley. Each station is budgeted for \$1.1 million for nine firefighters (three per shift, one of whom is a paramedic).

Riverside County Fire Department has a mutual aid agreement¹ with the City of Blythe for the downtown/core area and an automatic aid agreement² with the CBVFD for annexed areas, which includes a power plant.

1 Mutual Aid Agreement is when the CBVFD requests assistance in the downtown/core area.

2 Automatic Aid Agreement refers to County Fire Department responding to annexed areas where requests are not required.

Findings

1. The City of Blythe has contracted for the last seven years with Workplace Safety Specialists of Phoenix, Arizona. This private company has trained several City departments, including the CBVFD, to address Cal/OSHA and Hazmat requirements. Cost for training the Volunteer Fire Department in 2005 was \$19,124.
2. A City volunteer fire official stated that the CBVFD adheres to the California State Fire Marshal's Safety Standards. However, Workplace Safety Specialists informed the Grand Jury, "They have never conducted, or claimed to conduct, State Fire Marshal courses, and have no intention to conduct such courses."

In addition, the City Manager stated, "The Blythe Volunteer Fire Department does not have to have any certification from the State Fire Marshals Office. ...The City has never attempted to gain that type of certification, recognizing that there is a distinction between the volunteer firefighter and full-time firefighter's training."

3. The City of Blythe contains many potential structural fire risks, including the existing power plant, future Wal-Mart and proposed casino.
4. The CBVFD does not respond to medical aid calls since the Department has no paramedics. Blythe Ambulance Service responds to medical aid calls. Riverside County firefighters only respond to medical aid calls in the annexed areas, and must obtain CBVFD permission to respond in the downtown/core area.
5. For the past two years, Riverside County fire officials have requested that the CBVFD allow Riverside County Fire to respond automatically to all medical emergencies in the downtown/core at no cost to the City. In addition to ambulance service, this would provide another paramedic and two firefighters to assist at the scene. These offers continue to be rejected.
6. According to the City Manager the, "City of Blythe building inspectors, under the direction of the Senior Building Inspector/Fire Marshal is [sic] responsible for conducting annual fire inspections within the City of Blythe."

The City's Senior Building Inspector/Fire Marshal/Code Enforcement Officer conducts fire inspections as part of the sign-off procedure for new business licenses. This is a one-time only inspection. This official has no formal fire training, but said that he has "on the job training."

7. A Riverside County fire official stated that if the City of Blythe were to contract with Riverside County for fire services, there would be no need for additional fire stations or fire vehicles in the area.

Recommendations

Riverside County Board of Supervisors
Blythe City Council
Riverside County Fire Department

1. City of Blythe volunteer firefighters be trained to meet the minimum training requirements for Emergency Medical Technician (EMT), Fire Fighter I, Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR), and First Aid.
2. City of Blythe volunteer firefighters obtain certified and documented training through a California-approved agency.
3. The City of Blythe conduct a comprehensive study regarding its fire prevention and safety needs as they relate to the power plant, Wal-Mart, a casino, future development and an expanding population.
4. The CBVFD grant Riverside County firefighters permission to respond to all medical aid calls.
5. All City of Blythe commercial and public buildings be inspected by a fire prevention specialist who is approved and certified by the State Fire Marshal.
6. The City of Blythe contract with the Riverside County Fire Department for complete fire services.

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