

From: Second District Representative, Santa Cruz County Fire Department Advisory Commission

RE: Attachment to March 20, 2024, FDAC meeting minutes

**FDAC: Ineffective or Marginalized?**

Addressing FDAC March 19, 2024 meeting agenda item VIII-E titled:

Future of FDAC – This Commission is being reviewed by the BoS. In the Jan BoS meeting, the following was on the agenda – “In the 2023 Long-Range Master Plan, the Santa Cruz County Fire Department identified the role of the Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC) as not fully utilized and/or understood and the work of the commission as ineffective. Commission members acknowledge the FDAC needs to change. Staff will work on what this looks like and return with a recommendation.”

(Aside: The title of this item is viewed as offensive to the FDAC members. Contrary to the listed authorship, it was not proposed by any FDAC member.)

This topic clearly arises from the recently completed A.P. Triton report titled, *Long-Range MASTER PLAN*. To begin, contrary to its title, The “Long-Range Master Plan” is not a master plan as contracted by the County at the request of the FDAC. Instead, it is a summary of County Fire data, interviews, etc. with no Master Plan. Worse, the FDAC was told it would take five months from start to finish, but took over a year to produce, and during the delayed time there was no communication.

Returning to the FDAC agenda title focus, the Triton report showed these quotes:

1. “The Board had not heard any issues from the FDAC in two years.”
- and
2. “The Fire Department Advisory Commission (FDAC) is not an effective or productive group. In its current form, it hinders good relationships and goal attainment.”

**Item 1: Not heard from FDAC in two years**

I find item 1 perplexing. A quick overview of my personal email history finds many communications each of these years. In general, I would use phone calls to discuss important items both with my district’s Supervisor, Zach Friend, and District 5 Supervisor McPherson’s staff member, Gine Johnson – the latter because of a history of past communication. Furthermore, I spent much effort with District 4’s Supervisor and staff to correct for the absent FDAC member from that district, to no avail.

I personally know that District 3 and 5 supervisors were contacted. FDAC District 3’s rep, owner and operator of Big Creek Lumber, Janet Webb, had her community and company forest hit hard by the CZU Complex fire and had to have been in contact with her supervisor. She resigned from the FDAC two years ago. FDAC District 5’s rep, and retired SCCFD Volunteer Captain, is in near constant conversation with McPherson’s group.

Lastly, I don’t believe the FDAC is tasked with writing an annual letter to the Board of Supervisors, so it can’t refer to that. This confirms that the Triton report came to erroneous conclusions, at least in this aspect.

## **Item 2: Describing the FDAC as “Ineffective”**

It is interesting that this has gone from an FDAC Master Plan Update effort to drilling down on the competence of the FDAC when the real issue is that County Fire (aka SCCFD) has become a shell of an organization with terms dictated by its service contractor, CalFire. In short, the FDAC has been marginalized by CalFire as County Fire has become a department essentially staffed and run by CalFire.

FDAC has been very effective with or without CalFire encouraged partnership. The CSA 48 2019/20 parcel tax ballot measure was initiated by the FDAC, taken up by the Board of Supervisors, researched with FDAC and consultants, FDAC sponsored town halls with CalFire support, and FDAC members manning phone banks. The measure passed by more than 67% - a heavy lift in a Prop.13 world. FDAC participated in suggestions in major equipment purchases based on local area experience. It oversees the budget as exemplified last year: In April CalFire presented three catastrophic proposals for County Fire service that would have either bankrupted the department with 5-7 years or reduced service by 40%, the FDAC jumped into action (panic calls to their supervisors were more like it), which resulted in an emergency FDAC meeting in which the County General Service Dept. representative produced an acceptable plan that both maintained service at same levels and stayed within budget.

However, it is important to understand how this perception of marginalization has evolved. It came about as County Fire allowed the CalFire organization to both staff and run its fire department. Historically, SCCFD has had a large volunteer firefighter participation. That has dropped significantly over the last several years such that volunteer companies only respond to 5-30% of all emergency calls. In response, the County has essentially contracted CalFire to staff and run County Fire. The result is that County Fire has a near 100% reliance on CalFire and CalFire has little time or incentive to focus on specific needs of County Fire that vary from CalFire nor revitalize County Fire, even if this were possible.

Regardless, the County is CalFire’s customer. The County pays CalFire to provide County Fire services, and the FDAC is one of the few avenues in which the County can have oversight without taxing its administration. Without the FDAC County Fire issues would otherwise be ignored or delayed in communication to County offices.

Returning to the question “is the FDAC ineffective or marginalized?” The answer is that when the FDAC becomes marginalized by the agency it’s supposed to monitor, it is ineffective. This is the situation we will discuss today and look for improvement solutions.

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Second District FDAC representative