

**ROSS VALLEY FIRE DEPARTMENT  
STAFF REPORT**

For the Meeting of June 8, 2022

To: Board of Directors

From: Jason Weber, Fire Chief

**Subject:** Receive Report and Direct Staff regarding ongoing funding source(s) related to the FEMA SAFER Grant

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**RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Board receives the report and directs staff regarding ongoing funding for additional personnel if the FEMA SAFER grant is awarded and ultimately accepted by your Board.

**BACKGROUND**

The purpose of the SAFER Grant Program is to provide funding directly to fire departments to assist with increasing the number of firefighters to help communities meet industry minimum standards, attain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate protection from fire and fire-related hazards and fulfill traditional missions of fire departments.

To achieve this purpose, the SAFER Grant Program is a competitive, discretionary grant program that provides federal financial assistance to help fire departments hire new firefighters or change the status of part-time or paid-on-call firefighters to full-time firefighters. The goal is to improve fire department staffing levels to ensure that an adequate number of personnel respond and safely perform at incident scenes and provide protection from fire and fire-related hazards within communities.

*The grant is a three-year term* to assist fire departments by paying a portion of the salaries and benefits of the SAFER-funded positions. Only the salary and associated benefits (actual payroll expenses) for the SAFER-funded positions are eligible. Costs are reimbursable only if they are included in the standard salary and benefits package available to all operational firefighter positions and are contractually obligated. In addition, only the salary and benefit costs for regularly scheduled and contracted operational shift hours are eligible for reimbursement (no unplanned overtime) with SAFER Grant Program funding.

The federal portion of grant funds for years one, two, and three is based on the usual annual cost of a first-year (i.e., entry-level) firefighter in the department when the grant application was submitted. "Usual annual costs" includes the base salary (excluding non-FLSA overtime) and the standard benefits package (including the average health cost, dental, vision, FICA, life insurance, retirement/pension, etc.) offered by fire departments in the first year (i.e., entry-level) firefighters.

Historically, the amount of Federal funding provided to a recipient for hiring a firefighter in any fiscal year was as follows:

- In the first and second years of the grant, up to 75% of the usual annual cost of a first-year firefighter employed by that department when the grant application was submitted; and
- In the third year of the grant, up to 35% percent of the usual annual cost of a first-year firefighter employed by that department when the grant application was submitted.

In cases of demonstrated economic hardship, and upon the recipient's request, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Administrator may waive or reduce the cost-share, position cost limit, minimum budget, or supplanting requirements. The SAFER Grant Program Hiring of Firefighters Activity grant recipients may apply for the available waivers.

*The 2021 SAFER Grant program has waived all matching funds for the entire three-year period.* SAFER Grant Program award recipients are under no obligation to retain the SAFER Grant Program-funded positions after the conclusion of the performance period.

## **DISCUSSION**

Your Board has expressed interest in the FEMA SAFER grant and directed staff to apply. A major consideration surrounding this grant is the ongoing funding after the three-year term of the grant.

As part of the Ross Fire Station decision, your Board has established a Labor-Management Sub-Committee to explore options and opportunities surrounding staffing and deployment and challenges and issues of budget and fiscal impacts.

Given the February 4, 2022 deadline, staff is asking for direction regarding applying for this grant cycle. Considerations associated with the decision to pursue the grant opportunity would need to be discussed in depth at a future RVFD Board meeting.

Some of these considerations are, but are not limited to:

- Financial and operational impacts with sustaining the additional staffing after the 36-month grant period.
- Approximate annual costs are \$625,000 with associated annual increases in personnel costs, including pension and other benefits.
- Onetime costs of approximately \$30,000 for PPE and other new employee costs.
- Depending on staffing decisions, overtime and uncovered costs beyond the grant's funds.
- Enhancement of service levels
- Apportionment of costs by member agency

During the grant period of performance, recipients of the FY 2021 SAFER Grant Program Hiring of Firefighters Activity are required to maintain the level of budgeted (filled and vacant positions) operational staffing that existed at the time of application to fill and retain the SAFER Grant Program-funded positions. Currently, RVFD has 30 budgeted operational positions; this grant would increase that to 33.

At the Labor-Management Sub-Committee meeting in April of this year, staff was asked to bring the discussion to the entire Board for consideration before any award notice from FEMA.

Staff is looking for direction from your Board on preparing options surrounding cost apportionment of the onetime and non-grant funded costs during the three-year award and the higher costs associated with the positions after the three-year grant (approx. January 1, 2026).

Multiple factors influence and ultimately complicate this discussion; those include:

- Recent decision to close Station 18 and shift personnel to the San Anselmo and Fairfax Fire Stations in July 2025.
- Member agencies' current and future financial positions, including existing public safety taxes in Ross (expires XXXX of 20XX) and Fairfax (expires XXXX of 20XX), as well as proposed extension and increase of sales tax in San Anselmo (November 2022).
- Current open contract negotiations with the Firefighters and Battalion Chiefs
- The transition from the shared services agreement with Marin County Fire Department to a new leadership/governance model is being studied over the next six months.

Based on the uncertainty outlined above, much of which is outside the direct influence of this Board, staff is recommending your Board take this opportunity to put forward questions, provide feedback to staff, and ultimately, any desired options for staff to research and return to your Board, after notice from FEMA regarding the grant status. Upon award notice from FEMA, your Board will have 30 days to accept or decline the grant. We anticipate awards notices will start early this summer.

**FISCAL IMPACT:**

There are no associated fiscal impacts with this report. However, future fiscal impacts would be significant and considered by your Board at a future meeting.