

Ross Valley Fire Department Board of Directors
STAFF REPORT

For the meeting of March 8, 2023

To: Ross Valley Fire Board

From: Jason Weber, Fire Chief

Subject: Receive Report on Opening of the FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant Program Application due March 17, 2023, Direct Staff as Appropriate

RECOMMENDATION

Receive report on the application process for the FEMA Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response (SAFER) Grant due March 17, 2023, and direct staff, as appropriate.

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, to attain 24-hour staffing to provide adequate protection from fire and fire-related hazards, and to 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 as a part of 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 at the time 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 to 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 at the time 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 at the time the grant application was submitted.

In cases of demonstrated economic hardship, and upon the request of the recipient, 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 2022 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 period of performance.

DISCUSSION:

Your Board has expressed interest in the FEMA SAFER grant and directed staff to apply last year at the 2022 January board meeting. The notice of this grant cycle and the due date before our next Board meeting necessitates bringing this to your board for consideration. 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, as well as challenges and issues of budget and fiscal impacts.

Given the March 17, 2023 deadline staff is asking for direction regarding submitting an application 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 not limited to:

- Financial and operational impacts with sustaining the additional staffing after the 36-month grant period.
- Approximate annual costs are \$715,00 with associated annual increases in personnel costs including pension and other benefits.
- One-Time 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
- Location of additional staffing to meet service demands.

During the grant period of performance, recipients of the FY 2022 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, in addition to filling and retaining the SAFER Grant Program-funded positions. Currently RVFD has 30 budgeted operational positions, this grant would increase that to 33.

FISCAL IMPACT:

The receipt of this Staff Report does not have any associated fiscal impact. Future fiscal impacts would be significant and would be considered by your Board at a future meeting.