



## CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

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**TO:** City Council **DATE:** June 8, 2026

**DEPARTMENT:** City Manager's Office

**PREPARED BY:** Isaac Whippy, City Manager

**PRESENTER:** Isaac Whippy, City Manager & Steve Orsi Fire Chief

**AGENDA TITLE:** Receive Report on Historical Fort Bragg Fire Safety Protection Funding, Discuss Current Long-Term Local Fire Funding Needs, and Consider Approval of Professional Services Agreements with Lew Edwards and FM3 Research

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### RECOMMENDATION

1. Receive a report regarding the history and expiration of the City's Local Fire Safety Equipment Tax Levy;
  2. Discuss local long-term fire safety protection, life-saving apparatus and equipment replacement needs;
  3. Approve Professional Services Agreements with Lew Edwards and FM3 Research to conduct community outreach and public opinion research regarding future fire protection/life-saving equipment funding options;
  4. Direct staff to evaluate potential funding alternatives, including restoring a dedicated Fire Life-Saving Equipment Tax Levy and other public safety funding strategies; and
  5. Direct staff to return to the City Council with the results of the community survey polling effort, funding scenarios, and recommendations for Council consideration, including whether to place a fire safety protection funding restoration measure before the voters.
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### BACKGROUND

Providing reliable fire protection services requires more than personnel and training. It also requires ongoing investment in the fire engines that transport first responders to 911 incidents, life-saving rescue equipment, 911 communications systems, firefighter protective gear, and other critical public safety infrastructure.

For many years, fire protection services within the greater Fort Bragg area has been provided through the Fort Bragg Fire Protection Authority (FBFPA), a Joint Powers Authority established in Fiscal Year 1989/90 between the City of Fort Bragg and the Fort

Bragg Rural Fire Protection District, a district of the County of Mendocino. The FBFPA was formed as a joint effort of the two agencies to provide coordinated fire suppression, emergency rescue, and fire protection services throughout the community.

Under the Joint Powers Agreement, the FBFPA operates as an independent public agency with authority to acquire equipment, enter contracts, and administer fire services. Funding responsibilities are shared between the City and the Rural Fire District/County based on a three-year average call ratio. Because a majority of calls historically originate within the City, Fort Bragg typically funds a larger share of the Authority's operating costs.

As part of maintaining a reliable emergency response system, local voters approved dedicated local funding to assist specifically with the replacement of life-saving fire apparatus and equipment.

In 2004, voters approved Measure M, establishing an annual Fire Equipment Tax Levy of \$18 per parcel. In 2014, voters approved Measure O with nearly 78 percent support, extending the levy for an additional ten years and increasing the assessment to \$22 per parcel annually totalling \$53,274.

The purpose of the levy was straightforward: to help fund the replacement and acquisition of fire apparatus and emergency response equipment necessary to protect the community.

Measure O expired in December 2024. As a result, the City no longer has a dedicated local funding source specifically reserved for life-saving fire apparatus and equipment replacement.

While the City continues to support fire services through its annual operating budget and other funding sources, the expiration of the levy presents an opportunity to responsibly and comprehensively evaluate future equipment replacement needs and determine whether a dedicated local funding strategy should be re-established moving forward.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

Fire engines that transport our First Responders to 911 incident scenes are among the most important assets owned by the City. They are also among the most expensive. When the current levy was approved in 2014, the cost of replacing a fire engine was substantially lower than it is today. Over the past decade, inflation, supply chain disruptions, manufacturing costs, and evolving public safety requirements have significantly increased the cost of fire apparatus and equipment.

Today, a new fire engine can exceed \$1 million, and replacement timelines often extend several years from order to delivery.

Although the Fire Equipment Tax Levy helped offset a portion of these costs, the levy increased only once from \$18 to \$22 per parcel while equipment costs rose dramatically during the same period. As a result, the purchasing power of the levy declined over time.

The expiration of the levy does not create an immediate funding crisis. However, it does provide an opportunity for the City Council to comprehensively and responsibly evaluate future needs and consider how the community wishes to fund critical public safety infrastructure over the long term.

At this stage, staff is not recommending a specific ballot measure, tax amount, or funding proposal. Instead, staff is seeking direction on whether additional analysis and community engagement should occur before future recommendations are brought forward.

Potential options that may be considered in the future include:

- Continuing to rely on General Fund resources, grants, and one-time funding sources;
- Exploring restoration of a dedicated Fire Equipment Tax Levy;
- Evaluating broader public safety funding strategies that could support fire apparatus, life-saving emergency equipment, 911 communications infrastructure, and local disaster preparedness investments; or
- Developing a combination of funding sources that balances affordability with long-term fire protection and life-saving equipment replacement needs.

The City faces approximately \$5.5 million in anticipated fire apparatus and equipment replacement needs over the next ten years. While these costs will occur over time, they highlight the importance of long-term planning and financial preparedness.

Approval of agreements with Lew Edwards and FM3 Research will provide the City Council with objective community feedback and reliable data regarding future funding options. Following completion of the assessment and initial outreach effort, staff will return to the City Council with the results, potential funding scenarios, and recommendations for consideration, including whether the Council wishes to place a local fire protection funding restoration measure before the voters.

## **FISCAL IMPACT**

The former Fire Equipment Tax Levy generated revenue through an annual \$22 per parcel assessment collected through the County property tax roll.

The proposed agreements with Lew Edwards at their discounted rate of \$6,000/ month and FM3 Research for their poll is estimated to cost approximately \$60,000 in total, and will be funded through November 2026. Both firms have extensive experience in our region, including their successful assistance with Measures T & U in 2024.

Should the City Council direct staff to continue evaluating future funding options, additional fiscal analysis, 911 equipment replacement schedules, and revenue projections will be presented at a future meeting.

## **CONSISTENCY/STRATEGIC PLANNING**

Staff recommends retaining Lew Edwards and FM3 Research to conduct public opinion polling and community engagement regarding future 911 fire equipment funding options.

The purpose of the polling effort is not to advocate for a particular outcome or funding measure. Rather, it is intended to provide objective information to assist the City Council in understanding community priorities, concerns, and potential levels of support for various funding approaches.

The outreach effort would provide valuable information regarding:

- Community priorities related to local fire protection services;
- Public understanding of future firefighter and life-saving equipment replacement needs;
- Potential viability of various funding approaches;
- Community expectations regarding accountability and oversight; and
- Effective communication strategies.

The results of the polling effort would be presented to the City Council at a future public meeting. At that time, the City Council would have the opportunity to review the findings, evaluate potential funding scenarios, and determine whether it wishes to pursue placement of a local fire protection funding measure on a future ballot.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

1. Professional Services Agreements – Lew Edwards and FM3 Research
2. Historical Summary of Measures M and O
3. Life-Saving Fire Apparatus Replacement Overview