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## SECTION X—FIRE DEPARTMENT

### *ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FIRE DEPARTMENT*

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The Albany Fire Department is a full-service fire department. It provides the community with fire protection, emergency and disaster response, paramedic services, and community education, including CPR, first aid, home safety, earthquake preparedness and search and rescue classes. The Fire Department provides residents with a smoke detector installation program, sponsors a junior firefighter program, and is available for blood pressure screening for any Albany resident. The Fire Department is also responsible for the City's Emergency Operations Center at the Albany Community Center. Since 1994, the Albany Fire Department has installed approximately 1,720 residential smoke alarms. The Fire Department also has new and growing responsibilities in the areas of hazardous materials management and response and storm water pollution prevention. Additionally, Fire Department personnel maintain a high level of departmental training in fire prevention and code enforcement to assist them with the annual inspections of approximately 820 commercial businesses and residential apartments.

The Fire Department operates out of one fire station with twenty (20) sworn personnel.

### *PRESENT SITUATION, OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT, AND CONSEQUENCES OF NOT TAKING ACTION*

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The Albany Fire Department is well run and well respected among small agency fire departments. It is recognized as a leading small agency in the areas of fire prevention, emergency preparedness, and emergency medical response.

The Department has experienced little in the way of turnover or growth. This fact, no doubt, works against the Department's efforts to diversify its workforce. The Department is mostly comprised of non-Hispanic white men. There are no women in sworn fire safety positions.

Fire departments operate in very close quarters; the human relationships are close knit and status quo oriented. As a result, fire departments are often more resistant to change than other departments. However, when the opportunity for change and reassessment presents itself, such as a change in departmental leadership, the community and organization can and should take a fresh look at how it delivers its fire services.

### **Venturing With Other Agencies for the Future**

Small fire safety agencies in urbanized service areas can be inefficient when compared to larger agencies. What they gain in community popularity and connectivity, they lose in duplication of effort, particularly in the areas of training, administrative services, and command staffing. Many of the fire service training, safety and fire code regulation programs are now regulated by the Federal and State safety regulations, and if done at all, must be done to meet these regulations. Some, like the EMS program, are audited by the EMS oversight agencies. The fire service has become increasingly technical and complex, requiring program managers or specialists to spend considerable time in them in order to be adequately trained and competent.

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Citygate recognizes that affording an effectively-sized command staff has become very difficult for all small agencies. These pressures have combined to drastically reduce the number of career fire departments in the state that operate three or fewer fire stations by themselves.

The other increasing issue for command staff is to be trained, competent and certified to safely supervise emergency operations. It is becoming very difficult for small agencies to provide adequate training to “grow” their command staff internally. At the same time, recruiting many command capable personnel from other fire agencies is increasingly difficult because many are no longer willing to relocate their families late in their career due to the cost of housing and the fact that with the 3 percent at 50 retirement plan, they are close to retirement just when they advance finally to the command ranks. Moreover, the City chooses to exercise its right to provide transport services as part of its medical emergency response program. This higher level of service adds additional technical training requirements for all firefighter/paramedic personnel and additional management complexities for the command staff. Additionally, there is the expense of the ambulance apparatus and conducting the transport billing/revenue collection.

Currently, Albany’s Fire Department is only staffed with two chief officers. They and/or an acting officer must provide trained, certified, competent Incident Command functions at emergencies 24/7/365. Historically, many small agencies “made do” with a small command team who could live locally and take emergency call duty from home after hours. This model is in increasing jeopardy going forward for cost of residency reasons and the amount of certification training for an Incident Commander.

In other Fire Master Plans, Citygate has frequently recommended that a minimum fire headquarters model is 3-5 chief officers and one clerical support. This provides:

- ◆ 3 – Battalion Chiefs, one of which is always on-duty in the fire station 24/7/365
- ◆ 1 – Fire Chief (Command, Management, Budget, Department Head functions)
- ◆ 1 – Fire Prevention Position (Fire Marshal or Inspector)
- ◆ 1 – Office Support (clerical).

Citygate typically finds that once the above minimum fire headquarters staff is in place they can supervise effectively 3-7 or even 10 fire stations, depending on geography and other factors. Given the economics of providing this level of headquarters service for a 1-3 fire station department, the number of all career firefighter, independent fire departments are rapidly disappearing statewide. Over the last decade, for economy of scale, many small agencies have merged into larger existing agencies or done sub-regional consolidations.

Albany should also take steps to venture or consolidate with other fire agencies in the East Bay region. As step one towards this objective, a transparent discussion should take place to answer the following key questions:

1. To what degree can Albany obtain its current level of service at a lower cost by joint venturing with other fire agencies?
2. To what degree can Albany obtain a higher level of service at its current level of cost by venturing with other fire agencies?

Citygate believes the answers will lead to cost containments and service enhancements; both of which would be good for the community. Although the needs of the community are paramount,

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we believe the answers to these two questions could also be a win for the City's current fire personnel overall.

In terms of beneficial outcomes, venturing or consolidating with other fire agencies in the East Bay region will over time achieve the following:

- ◆ With a larger department, there are more senior line fire captains to draw from if acting chief officers are needed.
- ◆ With a larger, common chief officer pool, there is more opportunity to train and develop future assistant and fire chief officers.
- ◆ A full-time, dedicated duty chief would be available at all times.
- ◆ A full-time, dedicated division chief would be available to manage each of the specialty areas requiring full-time technical attention, such as training and fire prevention.
- ◆ Adequate administrative support staff.
- ◆ Adequate prevention and training programs.
- ◆ Common training and focus for line personnel and also for staff seeking promotion into the chief ranks.
- ◆ Ability to standardize operations and equipment, resulting in both improved emergency scene coordination and a potential for cost savings.
- ◆ A larger pool for career development, promotions and backfill when vacancies occur.

### **Governance Models for the Future**

There are several models for the governance and operation of shared or consolidated fire services. Each has its strengths and shortcomings. The principal models are:

- ◆ *Independent Fire Districts:* Establishment of an independent fire district would require LAFCO agreement and two-thirds local voter approval for a new tax rate to support the district, which will require independent funding. An independent district will require a larger administrative structure because it will have a separate and independent board, be responsible for its own personnel, finance and purchasing functions plus not be accountable to the local city elected officials. Its advantage, if approved by the voters with an adequate revenue base, is that it has as its principal focus the provision of fire service that is appropriately funded without using current city General Fund revenues that might be devoted to other purposes such as police services.
- ◆ *Dependent Fire Districts:* A dependent district is usually operated by County Boards of Supervisors serving as the board of directors. While dependent districts have most of the same advantages and disadvantages of independent districts, uniquely the governing board is not composed of people wholly elected from within the area served by the district. The only direct representation is the supervisor or supervisors whose district(s) cover the participating municipalities within the district.

- ◆ ***Joint Powers Authorities:*** When several cities or other local government agencies seek to provide consolidated services and yet want to retain a greater measure of fiscal and operational oversight than either an independent or dependent district would allow, they usually turn to the creation of a Joint Powers Authority. California law allows an almost infinite variety of shared services between governmental agencies and permits the partners to create almost any governing structure that meets the local needs for fiscal and operational control. For example, a JPA with a board composed of elected officials from each of the partner agencies is the most common form. Funding for the combined service can similarly be provided to the JPA by each partner agency according to whatever formula the parties may find agreeable.
- ◆ ***Contract for Services:*** Frequently, the shared fire service may be best provided by having one agency take the lead and act as the service provider while the other agency pays a “fair share” under contract arrangements. It is not uncommon for one city to provide fire service to a portion of or all of a neighboring city at an agreed contractual cost. All of the savings and operational efficiencies that might be found in consolidation under a JPA can be realized in a contractual arrangement. However, the disadvantage is that day-to-day policy control rests with the elected officials of the agency providing the service. Unless there is a close and common vision regarding how to operate the service, conflict can arise between the partners, with the city “buying” the fire service from their neighbor feeling they “pay” but have little control over the nature and quality of the service.

## **Succession Planning**

As stated previously, when the opportunity for change and reassessment presents itself, such as a change in department leadership, the City owes it to itself and the community to take a fresh look at how it delivers its fire services. The City needs to do succession planning for its fire chief position. The fire chief succession plan and the venturing with other agencies questions are interrelated. This complicates command staffing decisions and, to that extent, succession planning.

Because of the complexities involved in providing safe, certified fire incident command staffing and in understanding the types of sub-regional partnership options, the City would be best served if it obtained as needed outside expertise to assist City staff with a fire chief succession plan and taking steps to venture with other agencies questions.

Also, last year Ralph Andersen Associates conducted a limited scope management study for the City. The study looked at the pros and cons of combining the two public safety chief positions into one position as well as shared management with another fire agency. The City should consider the information provided in the study as it prepares its Succession Plan for the Fire Chief position.