



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

VICE-CHAIR

SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: April 8, 2025

20

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**FIGHTING CORPORATE MONOPOLIES THAT UNDERMINE FIRE PROTECTION
(DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

Every San Diegan deserves to know that when crisis strikes, our firefighters have the equipment they need to respond. But a growing corporate monopoly crisis in the firefighting apparatus industry is putting lives at risk—and forcing taxpayers to foot the bill for Wall Street greed. **Over the past decade, private equity firms have aggressively bought up and consolidated fire apparatus manufacturers, creating massive corporate monopolies that put profits ahead of public safety.**

This consolidation has driven prices sky-high, reduced production quality, and created years-long procurement delays. During the devastating Los Angeles fires, dozens of fire engines and ladder trucks sat idle in maintenance yards as fire departments waited—sometimes for years—for backlogged replacement vehicles. Taxpayers are being squeezed—paying more, waiting longer, and getting less. The New York Times reports that ladder trucks have doubled in cost over just a few years, now topping over \$2.3 millionⁱ.

While corporate conglomerates were monopolizing the industry and eliminating competition, something curious happened—they also started cutting production capacity just as demand for fire trucks surged. When federal COVID-19 funds gave state and local governments the ability to invest in new emergency equipment, fire truck orders spiked by nearly 50% from 2020 to 2022ⁱⁱ. Yet instead of ramping up production to meet this demand, the reports show that corporate conglomerates have actually shut down manufacturing plants, worsening procurement backlogs that have now ballooned into the billions. Despite years-long delays, these corporate giants have made little effort to expand capacity, seemingly unbothered by the fact that fire departments are left waiting—sometimes for years—for the life-saving equipment they desperately need.

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Our County of San Diego Fire Protection District has experienced these challenges firsthand, seeing extensive production delays that stretch over 900 days and fire truck prices that have doubled from \$650,000 to over \$1.3 million. However, local fire districts have few alternatives as the lack of competition in the industry leaves them with no choice but to accept these inflated costs and excessive wait times—further proof that corporate monopolies are putting profits ahead of public safety.

The devastating wildfires that swept through Southern California in January 2025 underscored the critical importance of having sufficient, reliable, and readily available fire-fighting equipment. San Diego County is one of the most fire prone regions in the entire state, with over 80% of the County designated as high or very high wildfire hazard zones. Our fire protection districts cannot afford these excessive delays or inflated costs, and we must take action to hold corporate monopolies accountable and protect our communities. Fires are a fact of life—but letting a few Wall Street investors cash in on disaster is immoral and unconscionable.

This issue is a growing concern across firefighting agencies. On February 20, 2025 the California Fire Service Leadership Alliance – comprising the California Fire Chiefs Association, the California Volunteer & Combination Fire Chiefs Association, the California Tribal Fire Chiefs Association, the Fire Districts Association of California, the League of California Fire Chiefs Department, the California Contract County Fire Chief Agencies, and the California Metropolitan Fire Chiefs Association – wrote a letter expressing their concern about this growing crisis and the need for more accountability.

The County has a strong track record of using affirmative litigation to hold corporations accountable and protect our communities from harmful business practices. This includes securing settlements from opioid manufacturers totaling more than \$60 million for their role in the opioid crisis, taking legal action against manufacturers of illegal ghost gun milling machines that make untraceable firearms, and social media companies for pushing addictive technology that harms youth. We have also pursued cases against environmental polluters and corporate landlords engaged in price-fixing and collusion. Challenging the monopolistic stranglehold on the fire apparatus industry is a natural continuation of this work. Enforcing antitrust laws can break up these monopolies, restore fair competition, and ensure that fire departments have timely, reliable access to the life-saving equipment they need.

Today's action directs the County to explore legal and advocacy options to take on the corporate monopolies that are driving up fire truck costs, cutting corners on quality, and making fire departments wait years for critical equipment. If we don't act, these corporate monopolies will continue to cash in while our communities burn. County Counsel will report back every 90 days with legal and advocacy options, legal strategies, and outreach opportunities to join statewide and national efforts, such as the California Fire Service Leadership Alliance, and next steps to hold these corporations accountable and ensure our fire departments get the resources they need. I urge my colleagues to support this effort to stand up for our communities and protect public safety.

RECOMMENDATION(S)
VICE CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

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1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer, in consultation with County Counsel, to explore legal and advocacy options related to fire apparatus antitrust and monopolistic practices under state and federal law. This may include, but not be limited to, joining statewide and national efforts, outreach to justice officials, and affirmative litigation strategies. Return to the Board in closed session on an ongoing basis every 90 days with updates on their efforts, and with options that the Board can elect to move forward with, through further direction.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Monopolistic practices disproportionately affect under-resourced and rural communities, where fire departments are already stretched thin. Ensuring equitable access to timely and quality fire trucks is crucial for the safety of all residents, regardless of income or location.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

Modern and reliable fire trucks are essential for effective wildfire response and environmental protection. Addressing procurement delays aligns with the County's sustainability goals by enhancing resilience to climate-related disasters.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for this request are included as staff time in the Fiscal Year 2024-25 Operational Plan in County Counsel based on existing General Purpose Revenue. There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

Delays in fire truck procurement can lead to increased property losses, higher insurance costs, and economic instability in fire-prone areas. Taking action to address these delays ensures that fire departments have the necessary resources to protect homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure, thereby supporting economic stability.

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

N/A

BACKGROUND

Over the past decade, private equity firms and corporate conglomerates have consolidated the fire apparatus industry, creating a near-monopoly that's driven up costs, delayed delivery timelines, and left communities vulnerable. Departments across the country are waiting years for fire trucks and equipment, endangering public safety.

As competition has diminished, prices have soared, and production timelines have grown unmanageable. According to reporting by *The New York Times*, the cost of a standard ladder truck has increased from \$1.3 million to approximately \$2.3 million in recent years, while some fire departments have faced wait times stretching many years for vehicle delivery. In some cases, critical firefighting equipment has sat idle in maintenance yards as departments wait for

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backlogged replacements—putting our communities at increased risk and vulnerability against potential catastrophic wildfires.

Rather than scaling production to meet growing demand—particularly following a surge in federal COVID-19 funding for emergency infrastructure—industry giants have shuttered manufacturing facilities and reduced production capacity. The result is a deepening procurement crisis, one that strains local firefighting budgets, reduces readiness, and puts communities at risk.

San Diego County is acutely vulnerable to these trends. More than 80% of the County is designated as a high or very high fire hazard severity zone, and the wildfires that swept through Southern California in January 2025 were a stark reminder of the critical need for fast, reliable access to firefighting equipment. Yet the County Fire Protection District has experienced firsthand the impact of the industry’s monopolistic practices: production delays exceeding 900 days and fire engine prices that have doubled from \$650,000 to over \$1.3 million. Despite these challenges, fire districts have few viable alternatives. The lack of competition gives manufacturers outsized power to realize record profits, and dictate their terms, timelines, and pricing—leaving local fire fighters and taxpayers to shoulder the consequences.

Given the County’s history of successfully pursuing legal and advocacy action against corporate actors engaged in harmful or anticompetitive conduct—from opioid manufacturers and ghost gun sellers to social media platforms and environmental polluters—there is a clear precedent and imperative for County action. Addressing the corporate stranglehold on the fire apparatus industry aligns with our broader mission to safeguard public health and safety, protect taxpayer dollars, and ensure that local agencies have the tools they need to respond effectively in times of crisis.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

This proposal supports the County of San Diego’s Strategic Plan, particularly its commitment to justice and sustainability. It advances the goal of ensuring a fair and equitable justice system by holding powerful corporate actors accountable, and it enhances climate resilience and emergency preparedness by ensuring access to life-saving infrastructure.

Respectfully submitted,



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)

Attachment A: California Fire Service Leadership Alliance Letter

ⁱ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/17/us/fire-engines-shortage-private-equity.html>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.firehouse.com/apparatus/article/21293905/the-firefighting-apparatus-industry-a-year-in-review>