



TERRA LAWSON-REMER

CHAIR

**SUPERVISOR, THIRD DISTRICT
SAN DIEGO COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS**

AGENDA ITEM

DATE: January 13, 2026

09

TO: Board of Supervisors

SUBJECT

**STRENGTHENING FIRE PREPAREDNESS WHILE PROTECTING TAXPAYER
DOLLARS (DISTRICTS: ALL)**

OVERVIEW

San Diego County Fire (County Fire) delivers around-the-clock fire protection and emergency services across 1.5 million acres, operating twenty-two fire stations in one of the most fire-prone regions in California.ⁱ Over the past decade, County Fire has made major investments to strengthen fire protection and improve readiness, and will continue to prioritize fire preparedness as wildfire seasons grow longer, hotter, and more severe.ⁱⁱ

Fire stations and training facilities are critical public safety infrastructure, shaping response times, operational readiness, and the health and safety of firefighters who live and work inside them. Many County fire stations were inherited decades ago and need to be renovated or replaced to meet current safety and operational needs. In recent years, County Fire invested over \$45 million to modernize fire stations across the region, including Boulevard, Pine Valley, Mt. Laguna, Palomar Mountain, and East Otay Mesa.

At the same time, delivering fire infrastructure has become more challenging.

- The cost of constructing new fire stations has increased sharply, driven by a 48% rise in construction costs since the pandemicⁱⁱⁱ and compounded by recent federal tariff policies. The County responded by anticipating and budgeting for above average construction price increases but initial estimates on recent projects have still come in high.
- The cost of fire trucks and other critical equipment has doubled in recent years,^{iv} placing added pressure on County Fire's budget.
- Federal disinvestment in wildfire prevention and preparedness, including recent cuts to the U.S. Forest Service^v and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration^{vi} has

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weakened fire preparedness, increasing risk across the region and raising the stakes for local fire operations.

- Federal cuts and new administrative burdens stemming from the Trump Administration's H.R. 1 are projected to impact the County budget by up to \$300 million annually, constraining fiscal flexibility across core County services.

As wildfire risk grows and federal support pulls back, the County has a responsibility to protect public safety while carefully stewarding taxpayer dollars in the face of financial headwinds. Today's item advances two targeted actions to improve how County fire infrastructure is delivered and maintained.

First, the County will pilot a new approach by incorporating the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)'s fire-specific infrastructure expertise into the delivery of a small-scale County Fire capital project. In partnership with County Fire administrative staff, the pilot will draw on CAL FIRE's expertise in building hundreds of fire stations across the state to identify cost-savings and efficiencies. County Fire already contracts with CAL FIRE for staffing and day-to-day operations. Today's pilot extends that partnership to construction project management and authorizes the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to move forward with procurement and construction for the fire station workout sheds project using the pilot flexibilities.

Second, the County will allow firefighters to handle clearly defined, non-technical maintenance tasks at fire stations to improve responsiveness and day-to-day conditions. Allowing on-site firefighters to address routine issues, such as painting, cleaning equipment, replacing light fixtures, and clearing downed trees, reduces delays and avoidable costs, particularly at remote stations. Major maintenance and repairs requiring technical skills will continue to be handled through established County processes.

Together, these actions reflect a disciplined approach to fire preparedness and public safety. As wildfire risk grows and federal support becomes less reliable, the County is acting as a responsible steward of taxpayer dollars, ensuring fire infrastructure investments deliver maximum readiness, safety, and value for firefighters and the communities who depend on them.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

CHAIR TERRA LAWSON-REMER

1. Direct the Chief Administrative Officer to pilot a capital construction project for the fire station workout sheds project, subject to funding and approval by the Board, to assess efficiencies from the San Diego County Fire Protection District (SDCFPD) providing specialized project management services.
2. In accordance with Board Policy A-87. Competitive Procurement, approve and authorize the Director Department of Purchasing and Contracting to issue request(s) for quotations identifying the Tuff Shed brand of workout sheds to maintain standardization.

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3. Designate the Director, San Diego County Fire, as the County Officer responsible for administering the construction contract(s) authorized by the Board of Supervisors on January 28, 2025 (08).
4. Direct the CAO to take the necessary actions to permit CAL FIRE staff to undertake specified non-technical basic upkeep activities at County Fire facilities.

EQUITY IMPACT STATEMENT

FEMA scores San Diego County as Relatively High on the Social Vulnerability Index,^{vii} indicating that demographic and socioeconomic factors worsen community outcomes when disasters strike. By supporting County Fire infrastructure delivery, today's proposal helps to bolster the fire protections that at-risk residents of the unincorporated areas depend on most.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPACT STATEMENT

The proposed action fosters climate resilience by streamlining the delivery of modern fire infrastructure capable of responding to longer and more intense fire seasons. The County remains committed to reducing its carbon footprint within its capital construction and major maintenance programs.

FISCAL IMPACT

Funds for these recommendations to enable a pilot project for San Diego County Fire administrative staff and CAL FIRE to perform construction management services and specified non-technical basic upkeep activities are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in San Diego County Fire based on existing staff time funded by existing General Purpose Revenue and the existing cooperative agreement with CAL FIRE.

Funds for the workout shed projects are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in San Diego County Fire and budgeted at \$1.9 million based on existing San Diego County Fire General Purpose Revenue.

There may be cost avoidance, savings and/or efficiencies from using County Fire administrative staff and CAL FIRE construction management services on the pilot capital project and routine maintenance. County staff will analyze these activities and report the results of the pilot efforts to the CAO. Funds for this analysis and reporting are included in the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Operational Plan in San Diego County Fire based on existing staff time funded by existing General Purpose Revenue. If additional resources are required, staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval.

There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years.

BUSINESS IMPACT STATEMENT

N/A

ADVISORY BOARD STATEMENT

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N/A

BACKGROUND

San Diego County Fire's (County Fire) 22 fire stations are the frontline defenses for one of the most fire prone regions in the United States.^{viii} Two of California's most destructive fires ever—Cedar and Witch—happened here.^{ix} And according to the Western Fire Chiefs Association, California's wildfire season is getting worse.^x Climate change creates warmer, drier seasons and abundant natural fuels into the late fall and winter, extending the possibility of extreme wildfires nearly year-round.^{xi} With the federal government slashing weather monitoring,^{xii} land management,^{xiii} and disaster preparedness and response,^{xiv} County Fire stations must be capable of answering the call as wildfire season intensifies.

The County of San Diego (County) is committed to ensuring County Fire's infrastructure meets the needs of a professional fire fighting force grappling with extreme wildfire risks.^{xv} Modern fire stations are critical to fire preparedness and climate resilience, especially in the context of federal disinvestment. High-quality, well-maintained stations lower response times, expand response capabilities, improve quality of life, and protect first responders from harmful chemicals and pollutants in their living quarters and workspaces. County Fire inherited a number of legacy fire stations through LAFCO processes over the years that need significant investment. The Descanso station, for example, was converted from a house built in the 1940s and Borrego Springs station used to be an old lumber yard. Fifteen stations remain in the condition they were inherited, which cost the County a minimum of \$700,000 annually for routine maintenance on aging facilities. Over the last ten years, the County invested \$39.8 million replacing fire stations in Boulevard, Pine Valley, Mt. Laguna, Palomar Mountain, and East Otay Mesa, and an additional \$4.8 million on renovations and repairs over the last five years.

Rising construction costs require the County to explore innovative ways to stretch taxpayer dollars further to meet County Fire infrastructure needs. Since the pandemic, construction costs increased 48%,^{xvi} twice the pace of consumer price inflation.^{xvii} The County has responded by anticipating and budgeting for above average construction price increases but initial estimates on recent projects still came in high. The County's ability to absorb infrastructure cost inflation is constrained by federal disinvestment across the board and the shifting of key safety net obligations onto local governments. Major cuts and new paperwork requirements around health care and food assistance could create a \$300 million gap in the County's budget and create difficult tradeoffs among core services. With five more stations planned for replacement over the long term and a queue of major maintenance projects, every fire infrastructure dollar must work harder to deliver readiness, reliability, and safety for firefighters and the communities they protect.

With wildfire risks increasing, fire infrastructure investments cannot be delayed. Today's item recommends the County leverage its longstanding partnership with CAL FIRE to help identify cost savings and efficiencies. CAL FIRE possess deep expertise from maintaining 635 fire facilities and delivering fire capital projects in every corner of the state. By leveraging CAL FIRE's specialized construction management expertise in partnership with County Fire and empowering on-site personnel to address minor issues more quickly, the County can stretch public dollars further.

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Today's item takes four actions to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of fire infrastructure construction and maintenance:

- Piloting the use of County Fire administrative staff and CAL FIRE's construction management expertise on a small-scale capital project to identify cost savings and efficiencies. The installation of workout sheds at fire stations is an appropriate capital project for this pilot. After County Fire completes the project, the CAO should identify learnings and implement any new best practices for realizing cost savings and efficiencies without sacrificing the County's commitment to quality construction.
- Authorizing County Fire to take necessary contract actions that were previously provided to the Department of General Services for the workout shed project in order to implement the pilot.
- Issuing a request for quotation(s) to obtain Tuff Sheds to be installed at County fire stations.
- Allowing firefighters to perform clearly defined, non-technical minor maintenance at fire stations to reduce delays, lower routine costs, and improve day-to-day conditions. Routine maintenance on aging fire stations costs a minimum of \$700,000 annually and can be time-consuming in getting workers, equipment, and supplies out to remote locations. Fire fighters know buildings, already possess job-relevant skills and equipment, and enjoy 24/7 access to fire stations. The County can reduce minor maintenance costs and improve general upkeep by allowing CAL FIRE staff to take on specified non-technical repairs and minor maintenance themselves.

Under Board Policy A-87, 3A7, the request for the Department of Purchasing and Contracting (DPC) to issue a request(s) for quotations ensures standardization of workout sheds for firefighters in our region. County Fire already has four Tuff Sheds at its stations. Continuing to use Tuff Sheds ensures firefighters, regardless the station from which they work, have access to similar spaces and configurations that support health and well-being and is in alignment with the Empower Initiative of the Strategic Plan by investing in our workforce. County Fire and DPC will seek quotations from any supplier of the Tuff Shed brand that meets specifications and will select the vendor with the lowest price that meets County Fire's construction timeline. The As-Needed Tuff Shed contract term will begin no sooner than April 1, 2026 and end June 30, 2028, subject to available funds.

The County remains committed to advancing fire preparedness, climate resilience, and quality public buildings despite financial headwinds. Together, these actions help ensure that continued investment in County Fire infrastructure is delivered as efficiently and responsibly as possible in a time of rising risk and rising costs.

LINKAGE TO THE COUNTY OF SAN DIEGO STRATEGIC PLAN

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By bolstering the County's efforts to reach its fire station modernization goals, today's recommendations advance the County's commitments to resiliency, workforce, and safety in the County of San Diego's 2026-2031 Strategic Plan.

Respectfully submitted,



TERRA LAWSON-REMER
Supervisor, Third District

ATTACHMENT(S)
N/A

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- ⁱ [Fire Hazard Severity Zone and Local PIO Viewer App](#)
 - ⁱⁱ [California Fire Season: In-Depth Guide | WFCA](#)
 - ⁱⁱⁱ [DGS California Construction Cost Index CCCI](#)
 - ^{iv} [Lawson-Remer calls out fire truck industry over price gouging, vehicle quality](#)
 - ^v [Forest Service cuts leave states scrambling to prepare for summer wildfire season - POLITICO](#)
 - ^{vi} [Trump admin is 'trying to put out a fire they started' at Weather Service as a cold, snowy winter looms | CNN](#)
 - ^{vii} [Map | National Risk Index](#)
 - ^{viii} [Fire Hazard Severity Zone and Local PIO Viewer App](#)
 - ^{ix} [top-20-destructive-ca-wildfires.pdf](#)
 - ^x [California Fire Season: In-Depth Guide | WFCA](#)
 - ^{xi} [California Fire Season: In-Depth Guide | WFCA](#)
 - ^{xii} [Trump admin is 'trying to put out a fire they started' at Weather Service as a cold, snowy winter looms | CNN](#)
 - ^{xiii} [Forest Service cuts leave states scrambling to prepare for summer wildfire season - POLITICO](#)
 - ^{xiv} [White House officials abruptly postpone final meeting of Trump-created FEMA task force | CNN Politics](#)
 - ^{xv} [California Fire Season: In-Depth Guide | WFCA](#)
 - ^{xvi} [DGS California Construction Cost Index CCCI](#)
 - ^{xvii} [Office of the Director - Research Unit: California Consumer Price Index](#)