

## Chapter 2 – Overview of Fire and Emergency Services in Stanislaus County

### Overview

The fire services system in Stanislaus County, as is the case in most counties in California, is a complex mix of municipal agencies, fire protection districts, and various forms of State fire protection. The following points provided a general overview of the fire protection system in Stanislaus County:

- There are six municipal fire departments in the County. Municipal fire departments are funded through general fund revenues. They include:
  - Ceres
  - Modesto
  - Newman
  - Oakdale
  - Patterson
  - Turlock
  
- In addition, there are 14 special districts that provide fire protection services in the County. They are funded from their own tax bases. They include:
  - Burbank-Paradise Fire Protection District
  - Ceres Fire Protection District
  - Denair Fire Protection District
  - Hughson Fire Protection District
  - Industrial Fire Protection District
  - Keyes Fire Protection District
  - Mountain View Fire Protection District
  - Oakdale Rural Fire Protection District
  - Salida Fire Protection District
  - Stanislaus Consolidated Fire Protection District
  - Turlock Rural Fire Protection District
  - Westport Fire Protection District
  - West Stanislaus Fire Protection District
  - Woodland Fire Protection District
  
- Two of the above districts have their fire service provided entirely by another service provider through a contract.

Jurisdiction	Service Provider
Industrial Fire Protection District	Cities of Modesto and Ceres
Ceres Fire Protection District	City of Ceres

- As noted above, the California Department of Forestry (CDF) provides service within State Responsibility Areas (SRAs), predominantly wildland and open space areas within

the County, and is also part of countywide mutual aid, with specific automatic aid agreements.

- In addition to the individual agency capabilities, there are several systems or subsystems in place within the County that support the operations of the fire delivery system and/or provide enhanced levels of service. They include the following:
  - A countywide mutual aid agreement in which any agency can request general or specialized services from another agency in the County
  - Agency automatic aid agreements in which neighboring jurisdictions drop their boundaries and practice *closest unit response*
  - Emergency communications – through the Stanislaus Regional 9-1-1 Center
  - Emergency medical services are mostly provided through an integrated system utilizing both public and private resources. Most fire agencies provide basic life support (BLS) response. Advanced life support (ALS) transport is provided by private vendors. Oak Valley Hospital District, Del Puerto Health Care District, and Westside Ambulance provide ALS level of service and are governmental agencies

### **Background on Providing Fire and Emergency Services by Agencies**

During the past 30 years, nationwide fire protection has undergone a process of remarkable change initiated by the publication of *America Burning* in 1974. This report by the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control raised the consciousness of the American public about the level of fire protection in the United States. About the same time, fire departments across the nation were beginning to assume a greater role in the protection of citizens from many more hazards than in the past – quickly expanding from the basic role of fire suppression, to a greater emphasis on emergency medical services, hazardous materials, and subsequently, on to fields of highly specialized rescue and being the organization of choice for deployment during a major natural disaster.

The process of change continues today. However, identifying the problems is far easier than providing solutions to them. For example, while the number of fires has decreased in the last decade, the number of firefighters that die in the line of duty has not been reduced. And the workload of fire departments has not diminished -- it has grown.

While many of the goals of *America Burning* and the National Fire Prevention Control Act of 1974 have been achieved, the basic responsibility of providing fire protection in the community is still mostly a function of local governments. Urban and suburban expansion has reached unprecedented levels across America, yet the revenues that provide funding of public services has increasingly become more complicated and convoluted. In the last 20 years, there have been a multitude of tax limitation laws, tracing their roots to California's Proposition 13, that have resulted in funding for fire protection being a lower priority than many of the other services in the community.

Well before *America Burning* and the California Tax Revolt, the private sector recognized the need to have an economic platform to conduct business; and yet sometimes mergers, collaborations, and partnerships were a means of choice to increase efficiency. For many years, critics have advised the fire service to *reinvent itself* and try to administer its programs more *like*

*a business*. However, many elected policy makers of any level of government have been reluctant to dabble with the organizational structure of a fire department because of the perceived political consequence associated with any mismanagement in that area.

Consequently, the process of change, which was once relatively uncommon in the fire protection industry, has become more wide spread. As fire departments react to internal forces, they are required to maximize their resources and, simultaneously, deal with external sources (i.e., expanding the scope of services, increase populations, limited capital investment, and increased demand for services). More and more local fire organizations must find ways of joining in partnerships with other jurisdictions to eliminate duplication and to focus diminishing resources on an increasing problem. Such strategic alliances have *NOT* been given consideration in the more rural areas of the State. As economic issues begin to become more complex, being able to react to change is often linked to adequate funding.

Strategic partnerships of emergency service organizations become an area of concern by many policy makers because it is not clearly understood. It is in this climate of professional and regional changes that ESCi was contracted to conduct the scope of work to look at these agencies. In this report, ESCi uses a variety of data collection techniques to pinpoint areas that could be improved with interagency cooperation, a review of whether consolidation is a reasonable solution, and a look at other potential service improvements that could be accomplished.

The destructive forces of a wildfire, a hazardous materials spill, an earthquake, or major flood pay no attention to jurisdictional boundaries. In the recent past, California has experienced all of these events. For example, the fire in the Oakland hills swept across communities at an incredible rate fanned by winds and fueled by heavy vegetation. Steep terrain and limited access added to the problems of fire personnel and evacuating homeowners. The Loma Prieta earthquake was also not limited to one community.

Problems of this nature require a high level of co-ordination of government services and community involvement. Any single local government agency has difficulty addressing a countywide issue. The composition and legislative mandate of the Local Agency Formation Commission provides a unique structure to address these issues. The Commission is comprised of a cross-section of local government and public representatives. LAFCO has the authority to study issues regarding coordination of local government services and compliance to Commission requests is required by law.

This can be a powerful tool to resolve countywide issues. Meaningful resolution can occur once the community is aware of the problem, and of possible options to address issues. Immediate solutions and long-range goals can be addressed. Since LAFCO cannot force solutions, well informed citizens can proceed faster if they have the appropriate data and information to base their decisions upon.

### **County Fire Warden**

The County does have a Fire Warden's office currently staffed by three personnel. The position of fire warden is defined in Title 16, Chapter 16.55.050. This position is empowered to enforce the provisions of the fire code. They are also given arrest powers and are authorized to carry firearms in the conduct of their duties. This office serves to assist in the coordination of a wide variety of issues but does not operate a fire suppression force. The Fire Warden's office provides support to the fire districts in the area of administration and finance, serves as the County Coordinator for Fire and Rescue Mutual Aid on a state and local level, acts as a liaison between the local agencies and the County, acts as the administrator for the California Incident Command Certification System (CICCS), funds and administers the dispatch fees for the County on behalf of all the fire districts, and are the Operational Area Coordinator. The City of Modesto is the contract agency responsible for arson investigation in the un-incorporated area.

In June 2006, the Board of Supervisors authorized the County Fire Warden's office to begin providing fire prevention services which were previously contracted through Stanislaus Consolidated Fire District with a portion of the Less Than County-Wide Fire Tax. Services performed by the newly formed Stanislaus County Fire Prevention Bureau include new construction plan review and inspections; fire system plan reviews and inspections; new business inspections; code adoption; fire prevention ordinances; state mandated inspections such as schools, daycares, and skilled nursing facilities; code enforcement; event permits; and weed abatement. As of January 2007, the Fire Prevention Bureau consisted of three fire prevention specialists, a fire marshal, a part-time special projects manager, and an administrative assistant. The Bureau's 2006-2007 budget for providing fire prevention services is \$525,000.

### **Local Fire Agencies**

Stanislaus County's local fire agencies have done a very good job of providing fire protection while facing incredible odds in funding their services. They face increased calls and multiple types of service demands and expectations while simultaneously having difficulty with sustaining funding levels. The majority of rural communities rely heavily on the dedication of their volunteers; cities are mainly staffed with full-time personnel. There are about as many full-time firefighters as there are volunteers currently listed in the system. Not all volunteers are active and, unfortunately, the volunteer ranks continue to decline. These volunteers are regular citizens who give up their time off to respond to emergency calls and attend training sessions.

This report identifies that County fire agencies are organized under a variety of state and federal government code sections that include:

- Municipal government
- Special districts
- Fire protection districts

### **Historical Perspective**

It should be noted that at one time all of the fire departments in Stanislaus County were somewhat isolated from one another. The municipal fire departments have evolved along a different path than the fire protection districts, due to increases in urbanization and subsequent

fiscal stability. Most of the cities were created many years ago when Stanislaus County was essentially an agricultural area, a phenomenon that is not limited to this county.

Most of the districts were created as a result of development pressure to provide some form of service as population increased in rural areas. Throughout California there are many areas in which cities have grown and encroached into what was previously agricultural land; so Stanislaus County is similar to other areas, in that it is experiencing the same pressures.

Many of the fire protection districts are independent districts and are not part of the County government structure. They continue with their historic governance model, while simultaneously having to cope with reduced area and associated property tax revenue to provide financial support. This is creating a jigsaw puzzle of level of service; a commensurate variance **exists** in the level of funding to provide basic services.

The following figure illustrates the dates for creation or recognition of the various entities involved in the study. As will be demonstrated, some are organizations with a great deal of tenure. Others are relatively new.

**Figure 3: Organizational Date of Fire Service Agencies<sup>1</sup>**

Department	Authority Having Jurisdiction	Date Formed
Modesto	City	1884
Newman	City	1888
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection	State	1905
Turlock City	City	1908
Ceres City	City	1911
Oakdale	City	1913
Hughson	City	1915
Patterson	City	1919
Ceres	FPD	1930
West Stanislaus	FPD	1935
Denair	FPD	1942
Salida	FPD	1942
Keyes	FPD	1943
Mountain View	FPD	1943
Woodland Ave.	FPD	1946
Turlock Rural	FPD	1958
Burbank Paradise	FPD	1942
Oakdale Rural	FPD	1945
Industrial	FPD	1950
Westport	FPD	1962
Stanislaus Consolidated	FPD	1995

<sup>1</sup> Results from Data Collection Survey.

## **Challenges**

The fire service in many areas of California is experiencing a difficult transition process to meet modern expectations. These difficulties are caused by the same factors that are creating challenges in the current delivery system. Some of these issues appear to be unique to this County, but they are not that unusual. Dealing with growth, increasing standards, and increased costs are common issues being faced by fire fighting agencies all over the state and nation.

Again, looking at it from a historical perspective, rural fire protection districts were not an obvious area of concern 25 years ago. The people who chose to move into rural areas were aware of the fact that they had slower response times. In fact, most individuals who lived in these areas were socially and economically connected with the volunteer fire service. Moreover, for years there were very few guidelines for the volunteer fire service to follow for operational capabilities. Over the past 25 years, the following items have occurred that have resulted in significant differences between the expectations of a rural fire department and the reality of one.

- ✓ Demands by government to meet higher standards are increasing.
- ✓ Costs of providing a broader range of services is often accompanied with an uncertain revenue stream to offset the costs.
- ✓ Fewer and fewer members of the community have an interest or desire to serve as volunteer firefighters.

One of the strategies that has been proven to be useful in dealing with challenges is to increase the level of cooperation among agencies.

## **Examples of Cooperative Activity**

It is important to note that the current fire service delivery system has produced excellent examples of how cooperative efforts can provide for a better use of resources. There are at least four examples worthy of description:

- ✓ The Visioning Process
- ✓ The Stanislaus Regional 9-1-1 JPA
- ✓ The Modesto Training Center
- ✓ The Mutual and Automatic Aid System

### **The Visioning Process**

Some planning processes have already been employed. On July 30, 2004, the Stanislaus County Fire Chiefs Association conducted a Strategic Visioning Meeting to discuss the *Future of Fire Protection in Stanislaus County*. A White Paper summarizing that meeting contained the following assessment.

Eight basic areas were identified where future improvements could result in a more effective and efficient service to the citizens of Stanislaus County:

1. Becoming more unified in approaching problems and solutions
2. Developing a governance model that works for everyone
3. Developing a standards of response coverage model that visualizes the service level and improves deployment capabilities

4. Developing revenue enhancement mechanisms
5. Meeting expectations of the community and the political leadership
6. Dealing with the diversity of the needs and expectations of the communities
7. Setting minimum service delivery standards for valid comparisons
8. Creating healthy relationships among the various parties as the process unfolds

Three primary goals to forward the visioning process to the next stage were identified:

1. Protecting the interest of the local jurisdictions while improving upon the effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery system through policy analysis
2. Improving the stability and sustainability of the revenue available to support fire protection on a countywide basis
3. Increasing the cooperation and coordination among agencies to reduce the gap between needs and expectation

Lastly, this same group identified:

- Stanislaus County's continued population growth and development will further increase service demands on emergency services.
- Funding of fire protection services will be an ongoing critical challenge to the success of fire departments in the future - government is being asked to do more with less.
- Community expectations with respect to the type and quantity of services provided by fire departments will continue to increase.
- Demographic changes with respect to the younger and older populations will continue to increase the demand for emergency medical services (retired, long lived, more complicated medical conditions, etc.)
- There is no nexus between the level of service and the tax base to support the development of fire departments.
- The single-family dwelling, which generates the most frequent demand for services, produces a smaller taxable base.
- There is a concern about maintaining local control among jurisdictions that may have an effect on the process.
- This process will not result in meaningful changes unless it is supported by the political entities charged with the decision-making responsibilities of the local jurisdiction.
- Lastly, it also realized that this process would not result in meaningful proposals unless the Fire Chiefs Association advocates, reviews, and responds to recommended action consistently with the support of the elected officials.

### **Dispatch and Emergency Communications**

In many areas of California, creating a countywide fire communications system is a problem. Typically there are multiple communication centers with multiple configurations. For example, in some areas there are stand-alone fire facilities intermixed with fire and police facilities, intermixed with fire, police, and emergency medical services (EMS) facilities. The Stanislaus County delivery system has already achieved one of the most highly desired economies of scale. The Stanislaus Regional 9-1-1 Center is a joint powers authority between the City of Modesto and the County of Stanislaus. They are the current provider of emergency communications.

The emergency communications center processes approximately 40,000 alarms per year and provides dispatch services for all fire departments in Stanislaus County, except for the City of Turlock. Turlock City has its own communication center for both police and fire department and is connected to the regional center through a phone line. Recent funding has been allocated to get the Turlock Fire Department's radio frequencies into the communications center, which will enhance communications reliability for all parties.

A current proposed change revolves around the selection of a new computer aided dispatch (CAD) system. There is a Communication Advisory Committee with representatives from the following agencies: Modesto police and fire chiefs, sheriff, and the County Fire Warden's office.

The obsolescence of radio equipment and the accompanying technology dictates that the existing system be replaced. The CAD system is approximately 15 years old, with an operating system that can best be described as obsolete. The working group developed a request for proposal (RFP) for an updated CAD system, which included features desired by all stakeholders. A paramount need of the fire agencies was system capability to upgrade responses, predicated on fire weather factors. This feature is presently included in the existing system but may not be in the proposed one. The fire chiefs regard it as a very high priority item.

Modesto City was the agency responsible for submittal of the RFP to the various vendors. The vendor of the existing system did not submit a bid. The submitted bids were narrowed down to two systems - Intergraph and Visaterm. Visaterm is best suited for police dispatch and has an records management (RM) component useful to police agencies but does not have the wildland upgrade desired by fire agencies. Fire agencies are not convinced that the system will meet their particular needs, thus some expressed concerns. Selection on the CAD system will be made within the next two months.

It was acknowledged that, at times, the workload of the current system is more than the two fire dispatchers can handle, and there are gaps where the dispatchers may be delayed in acknowledging field units due to work load issues. Dispatchers also function as backup call takers and all non-emergency police phones are answered at the regional communication center. The fire pod presently has three positions, with two dispatchers at the present staffing level.

Dispatch of fire units out of County on an inter-county mutual aid response follows State Office of Emergency Services (OES) protocols, wherein the intra-county response is best described as piecemeal. Even with the present issues, there is a high degree of cooperation and effectiveness amongst agencies throughout the County using the regional communication center.

### **Geographical Information Systems**

The County Information Technology (IT) Division provides geographical information system (GIS) support services to the various agencies. The GIS organization has a staff of two to three people using Arc View 3.1 and Arc Info 9.1. The GIS staff has developed custom programs; however, there is a backlog in updating the 9-1-1 street file due to growth in housing and new streets. Their files can be accessed through their web site at: <http://www.stanco-pworks.org>.

### **Modesto Training Facility**

A regional training facility has been constructed in cooperation with Modesto Junior College. This three-acre site, strategically located right off of Highway 99, represents a very sophisticated training opportunity. While there are not that many firefighters in Stanislaus County, the training facility that has been developed to support them verges on being one of the more extraordinary in the whole state. Approximately \$1 million has been devoted to the development of the following:

- An asphalted area that contains water supply and a driving surface
- A flashover simulator
- Storage facilities for firefighting apparatus and equipment
- A maintenance building to store miscellaneous equipment
- A five-story drill tower/burn building that represents some of the most intense firefighting training that is currently available

Funding of the regional training center is based on the following formula - Modesto Junior College, 55 percent; Modesto City, 20 percent; Stanislaus County, 20 percent. The remaining 5 percent is generated by fees for using the training facility. Modesto is considered to be an Accredited Regional Academy by the California State Fire Marshal's Office.

An advisory committee is composed of representatives from the County training officers, Fire Chief's Association, and Modesto Junior College. The committee meets monthly, except during the summer months, to make recommendations to the college staff on delivery of the training program. The regional training facility is an Accredited Regional Academy (ARA), as designated by the California State Marshal. The facility is also utilized by fire agencies outside of Stanislaus County. These departments, as identified in interviews, were Salinas, Monterey, Santa Cruz, and departments in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

According to the facility coordinator, this facility is used extensively by those departments that are engaged with the college. The program enables the facility to be utilized most every day of the week. In talking to many of the organizations within reasonable driving distance, many of these departments avail themselves of the facility's structural firefighting training as part of their annual training schedule.

Modesto Junior College has adopted a syllabus and curriculum for its firefighter certification training program. The program is definitely an asset for those volunteers who are capable of interacting with it. The deficiency in the program is that it is not based on distance learning but rather classroom contact hours, which means that those departments that are long distances away may or may not be able to avail themselves of the program without extraordinary effort on the part of their firefighters.

There is a recommendation to advocate for portions of available training information for volunteer firefighter be made available through long distance learning courses and that the California State Fire Marshal's Office support the creation of a delivery system in cooperation with California community colleges that will make distance learning part of the delivery of the volunteer firefighter certification system. The regional academy is presently formalizing a satellite system for use in delivering that long distance learning program.

### **Project 94 Report**

The *Project 94 Report*, which was prepared for the consolidation of the Riverbank, Empire, and Waterman-Hickford fire protection districts, contains much of the same information that is required for completion of the MSR report. In reviewing the *Project 94* Committee's document, many of the ideas and suggestions that were advanced are worthy of consideration within this review as well. However, it is also true that those recommendations forecast more of a strategic planning process than is provided in a municipal service review. *Project 94* includes consideration of decisions that go beyond the scope of an MSR.

Notable exceptions to this are the recommendations relative to a reorganization of the fire districts in the study area. Several of the recommendations cannot help but be reviewed again within the context of this document.

One of the apparent differences is that the *Project 94* departments' point of contact and their input was totally different than the point of contact of the departments in this MSR. The degree of reaction to the recommendations that were present in the interview response by the fire chiefs very definitely indicates that the process utilized by the *Project 94* Committee may have not been representative of the interests of all fire agencies that would be impacted by its findings. A large amount of support for the recommendations was not forthcoming.

### **Community Expectations**

A survey of community stakeholders was not conducted in developing this report; therefore, no specific conclusions can be made regarding community expectations of response time performance. However, anecdotal information suggests that there could be disparity between what a single-family dwelling owner expects in the way of response time and the reality of what is available depending on where he or she lives in the County.

While it is clear that most development in Stanislaus County is focused within the cities, there may be individuals migrating from those cities into rural, single-family dwellings. Having experienced urban levels of service and moving to a rural area, there is often a lack of recognition that the service delivery platform is substantially different in rural areas.

The net result is that many fire districts are caught in a dilemma. If one were to be able to go back to 1950's and observe the relationship between fire protection and the community, there would be a minimum amount of dissatisfaction. As the factors in the previous paragraph have accrued and evolved, fire protection districts are being forced to defend themselves while simultaneously being required to behave as if they have the same funding level as a municipal fire service. The reality is that this does not occur.

### **Economic Considerations**

Stanislaus County is a picturesque and photogenic area. However, it is not a well-developed economic area. Originally, the majority of business associated with this area came from the agricultural industry. That industry has eroded, if not evaporated, as a result of other variables. What has replaced it, in one respect, is an element of services and other forms of revenue generation. Secondly, there are small *enclaves* of minor businesses that are predominately service-oriented dealing with the people that live, work, or recreate in Stanislaus County.

From a standpoint of risk assessment, the fire stations that are deployed across this environment are dealing with essentially five different types of fire problems.

- ✓ The first is wildland. This is primarily the responsibility of the federal and state governments. Nonetheless, it is impossible for the local fire protection district to ignore. In the event that there is a fire and it is reported through the dispatch system, local government will be on scene and will be an active player in the initial attack of wildland fires that occur within their jurisdiction.
- ✓ The second is agricultural space. There is a significant amount of agricultural land within Stanislaus County, of which the majority falls under the Williamson Act. This area does not constitute much of a fire hazard except to the degree which agricultural products could be consumed by wildfire conditions. Approximately 87 percent of lands in Stanislaus County are eligible under the Williamson Act.
- ✓ The third is open space areas which are restricted to cattle and other forms of livestock. These areas are large tracts of land similar to land that is being cultivated, with the exception that the fuel mix is considerably different. Included in this third level is the rural living environment. The rural living environments are single-family dwellings that are widely disbursed across a very large area. They consist of commercial buildings and ranchettes that are on various sizes of parcels ranging from two to up to five to ten acres.
- ✓ The fourth level of risk can best be characterized as a suburban transition zone. These are the areas that are essentially around the population areas in which the housing is moderately dense and distributed on a *Mediterranean style* travel and road network. This type of network is characterized by roads that are winding and curved instead of the *checkerboard* pattern of tracts of the past. This style of road network often includes cul-de-sacs and limited access housing tracts with many traffic-calming devices.
- ✓ The last would be classified as the suburban environment. Suburban environment is based on concentrations of population that exceed 1,000 people per square mile.

### **What Is Different Today From Yesterday**

Fifty years ago when fire departments were isolated from one another by topography and geography, there was little need to worry about uniformity, standardization, and coordination. As communities have grown and the population has increased, the borders of cities and districts have become blurred if not totally transparent to the users of governmental services.

Starting in the 1970's with the impact of wildland fires, there has been an increasing need for fire service agencies to be able to work more closely together. Moreover, since the impact of September 11, 2001, and the transformation of emergency management into the arena of homeland security, followed most recently by the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, the role of fire service cooperation and coordination has become more of an issue than ever before.

The following statements are symbolic of the major differences that are driving public scrutiny of local government fire services. These differences are:

- Increase in the number of mandates from state and federal government imposed on fire agencies (paid and volunteer)

- Reduction of interest and motivation by the average citizen to serve as volunteer firefighters
- *City flight* – people who move into rural areas with an expectation of an urban level of service
- Accumulative effects of property tax shift (ERAF) and other financial actions taken by the state
- Fees for county services to districts have increased due to county fiscal constraints
- Annexations by cities resulting in detachments and decreased property tax revenue to districts. There is also a loss of revenue from existing benefit assessments.
- Increased scrutiny by public interest groups

### **The Best of All Worlds**

What would fire protection look like in Stanislaus County if funding were to be at the highest levels for everyone? In other words, what is the minimum level of service that everyone should be able to receive and what is the minimum level of effort that should be directed towards providing fire protection resources? In achieving a condition that is equitable throughout an entire county, one needs to recognize that one size does not fit all. Theoretically, if the per capita fire expenditures for a suburban fire service in the western United States were uniform throughout the county, the amount of funding for fire protection would be in excess of \$52 million. This is calculated by multiplying a \$100.00 per capita average cost times the current population, or a sum in excess of \$52 million. That is not going to happen right now. But if one looks at Orange County 30 years ago or Sacramento County 10 years ago and now Stanislaus County of today, the growth that could occur would quite probably make that figure eventually pale by comparison.

There are three very distinct factors that place demand on the fire service and affect level of performance. The three factors are population density, structural concentration, and emergency response workload. In other words, if numerous people are living closely together, involving a variety of structural conditions, and those result in demand being placed on the fire department to respond frequently, the best policy is to have a fairly high level of service. Lower levels of risk, often do not demand the same high level of service, but there is a minimum in both cases. The issue is managing the gap between the two.

Conversely, if the scenario consists of a very low concentration of people, buildings are spaced wide apart, and the calls are coming in infrequently, the level of service that is being provided may be the best than can be offered even if it is not adequately funded. Communities that were satisfied with basic services ten years ago, are now hard-pressed to keep up with demand. Improvements almost always cost more money than is currently available. Other communities are satisfied with their current levels of service and are not willing to invest any more.

Different departments are at different levels of maturation. That is true in this County. Closing the gap between what used to be and what needs to be tomorrow is closely linked to seeing the incremental changes that need to be adopted rather than waiting until a major gap exists.

## Summary

The *Project 94 Report* initially concluded that steps need to be taken to improve efficiencies in the Stanislaus fire service. That report also inferred that there is a step-by-step process; and if nothing was done, the situation will continue to deteriorate. This MSR supports that contention by noting that over the last 20 years there have been many changes in the fire service ranging from community expectations to mandatory duties to perform. Fire protection is becoming more expensive. Major differences in how to conduct services that have been generated by these changes have resulted in some specific issues emerging. However, there are no simple solutions to these issues. Some steps are needed immediately, while other steps would require further consideration. Chapter 3 will provide the reader with a description of the attributes of the existing agencies as they operate today.

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