

Frequently Asked Questions – April 6, 2021

Tuolumne County Fire Authority – Measure V (Mail Ballot due June 8, 2021)

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What is Measure V?

Measure V is a special tax measure being submitted to the voters in an all-mail ballot scheduled for June 8, 2021. The ballots and voter information will be mailed during the week of May 10, 2021 to all registered voters within the [boundaries](#) of the Tuolumne County Fire Authority. To be counted, ballots must be returned by June 8, 2021. If approved by the voters, the tax will generate approximately \$4,183,950 to specifically fund fire protection, suppression, and emergency response services. This funding will be distributed as shown below directly to the Tuolumne County Fire Department, Sonora City Fire Department, Groveland Fire Department, Jamestown, Columbia and Tuolumne Fire Districts, based on the number of properties served by each.

Entity	Total # of Parcels	Estimated Revenue
City of Sonora	2261	\$313,425
Columbia Fire Protection District	217	\$28,650
County of Tuolumne	24,068	\$3,117,975
Groveland Community Services District	4087	\$552,525
Jamestown Fire Protection District	362	\$50,175
Tuolumne Fire District	897	\$121,200
Total	31,892	\$4,183,950

[Why is Measure V being Proposed?](#)

This funding measure is being proposed to provide our citizens the opportunity to vote on a secure, reliable and predictable source of revenue specifically for fire and emergency response services in Tuolumne County. Fire departments throughout the county have been meeting for years to identify ways to most efficiently and effectively provide consistent and reliable fire services to all areas of the county. The lack of funding adequate to cover basic fire department expenses including personnel and equipment replacement is a common concern of the fire departments who formed the Tuolumne County Fire Authority. The Fire Chief for the County Fire Department presented to the Board of Supervisors in July 2020 an [overview report](#) regarding how dire the fire funding situation has become countywide. Measure V is intended to address these deficiencies and provide funding for staffing, operating and equipment replacement to secure the viability of fire services now and in the future.

Departments have for many years been financially challenged due to the dispersed, remote populations we serve, increasing fire fuel loads, increasing drought and weather-related fire incidents, aging fire engine fleet, reduced availability of volunteer firefighters, increasing cost of equipment, personnel, fuel and insurance. The state has continuously increased regulations and laws affecting fire services which has resulted in increased costs. At the same time, the revenue available to these departments has been nearly flat due to economic downturns, property tax limitations and even reduced revenue when the state shifted property taxes away from fire departments.

[What Have the Fire Departments Done to Reduce Cost?](#)

For decades the County and the Fire Districts kept costs low by relying on volunteer personnel to respond to calls for service and to assist the career staff with those responses. As the population ages, two income families are more prevalent, and stricter training requirements for firefighters have all contributed to the decline of the volunteers providing fire protection services. This has resulted in a growing need to provide paid staff to respond to calls for service in the County, which has increased costs.

The Fire Districts/Departments have maintained staffing at less than industry standard levels, frozen wages and stipends, deferred maintenance on equipment, continued to operate fire engines that in many cases are 10 or more years overdue for replacement and not upgraded to the latest technologies and equipment for firefighter safety and saving lives.

[Aren't We Doing Okay Now? Aren't Fire Department Response Times Good?](#)

With the resources currently available, our fire departments have performed very well in saving lives and property from fire and response to medical emergencies. We have also had luck on our side in the past few years, aside from a few very close calls. Fire Department response times of four minutes for the first engine and eight minutes for all engines to arrive are the industry standard for areas with populations of more than [500 per square mile](#). In rural areas with less population a response time of up to fourteen minutes meets standards. The Fire Department [Response Time](#) map shows the areas of the county that are within nine and fourteen minute response areas from existing fire stations. Many areas of the county are outside these response time standards, which can result in increased risk of loss of life and property. As detailed in the Fire services [Overview Report](#), many of these stations are not staffed and rely on volunteer response until the next closest staffed department can arrive. The report also details the aged and substandard condition of fire engines and response vehicles which can have a significant, negative effect on response times.

For someone experiencing a cardiac arrest, the survival rate is reduced by approximately 7% to 10% for every minute defibrillation is delayed; with the first five minutes being the most critical. After five minutes, the survival rate drops below 30% and at 10 minutes, there is less than a 10% chance of survival. The [Home Fire Timeline](#) graphic illustrates the building fire progression timeline and shows that flashover, which is the point at which the entire room erupts into fire after all the combustible objects in that room reach their ignition temperature, can occur as early as 3:00 to 5:00 minutes from the initial ignition. Human survival in a room after flashover is extremely improbable. After five minutes of free burning, structure fires are extremely difficult to contain to the room of origin and the whole house becomes threatened.

Another factor in controlling fire and saving lives is the number of firefighters and engines needed to simultaneously and effectively perform the tasks of rescue, fire suppression, and ventilation; and/or to keep small fires from becoming catastrophic under adverse conditions. It is typically recommended that 14 or more fire personnel respond to a structure fire within 11:30 minutes from the 911 call to effectively perform these critical tasks. Due to the minimal staffing (2 to 4 firefighters) at each staffed fire station in the county, mutual aid among all fire departments is necessary to achieve the required number of fire personnel on scene AND to ensure that additional emergency calls can be covered when a large turnout is needed to control a dangerous fire. Each department in the county is only as strong as their neighbor and that is the reason for creating the TCFA to ensure a solid financial and operational condition of the fire departments in Tuolumne County.

[What is the Tuolumne County Fire Authority?](#)

The Tuolumne County Fire Authority was formed to allow the member fire departments to join as a separate legal entity with the ability to levy a uniform and specific fire tax on parcels within its boundaries. The Fire Authority does not have separate staff and is not a new government agency that provides services on its own. Each fire department member of the Fire Authority maintains its own normally operating fire department with full autonomy in making decisions and setting its own service

levels. The Fire Authority is most simply a legal means to seek voter approval to levy a separate special fire tax that secures funding only to be spent on fire services.

The Fire Authority is governed by a Board of Directors made up of one appointee and one alternate from each member fire department. As a voter, you elect the Board members who govern your local fire department, and who also sit on the Board of the Fire Authority. The Fire Authority Board meetings are open to the public and the Authority must file annual reports on the amount of fire special tax levied, collected and spent. More information on the Tuolumne County Fire Authority is available [here](#).

[If approved, How Much Will Measure V Cost Me and How is it Collected?](#)

An annual special tax in the amount of up to a maximum of \$75 will be levied by the Tuolumne County Tax Collector on every unimproved residential and commercial parcel, and a maximum of \$150 for every improved residential and commercial parcel within the [boundaries](#) of the Fire Authority. **Example 1:** if you own a property with a house or commercial business on it, the fire tax will be \$150 per year.

Example 2: If you own a property with a house or commercial business and also own the adjacent, vacant parcel; your tax will be \$150 (improved parcel) + \$75 (unimproved parcel). When you build a residence or commercial business on your vacant parcel, the next tax year after you are done building the fire tax will increase from the **Unimproved** rate of \$75 to the **Improved** rate of \$150 per year. The fire special tax will increase by 2% each year so that the specific fire funding will keep up with the cost of providing the service for the long term. The Fire Authority Board is not required to levy the tax at its maximum rate approved by the voters as detailed above, and can levy at a lower level but can never levy the fire tax at a higher rate than approved.

[What will Measure V Pay For?](#)

Measure V will establish a consistent, predictable source of funding that will be provided to and used by local fire departments only, for the purpose of protecting lives and property from fire, to replace aging fire engines, firefighter safety and emergency response equipment such as “Jaws-of-Life”, reduce wildfire risks and improve emergency response capabilities. The individual fire departments then make their own decisions locally, in their normally budget process, about how the fire special tax money will be spent on their fire department operations and equipment.

[Will Measure V Reduce Response Times?](#)

Yes, funding from Measure V will be spent to increase available personnel and equipment in needed locations with the intent of increasing effectiveness and reducing response times. Measure V will provide for:

- Replacement fire engines and emergency response equipment to make them more functional, safe and reliable
- Additional fire stations and/or additional engines and firefighters at existing stations to provide for more rapid and reliable mutual aid coverage
- Matching funds for available grants for increased staffing, fire and emergency preparedness and response to allow fire personnel to more quickly and effectively control evolving incidents

- Funding for planning and grant match funds for implementing fire safety and wildfire reduction activities such as fire fuel breaks, evacuation and safe area planning, developing alternate evacuation routes, etc

Can Measure V Money be Diverted Away from Fire Services?

No, Measure V money is levied by the Fire Authority specifically and only to fund expenses of the member fire departments related to providing fire and emergency response services within their response areas, which extend throughout the county. This money belongs to the Fire Authority member departments as soon as it is received by the County Tax Collector, and is paid to the departments throughout the year on an established schedule. Since this is a “Special Tax” approved by the voters for a specific purpose, the federal government, state or county have no legal access to these fire tax funds other than to receive the per-parcel allocation of the tax for the County Fire Department as discussed above.

Will Tax Money Generated in Our Community go to Fund Our Fire Department?

Yes, each fire department will automatically receive the amount of fire tax generated within their specific boundaries. For Example, as shown in the tax allocation table above, the City of Sonora contains 2261 improved and unimproved parcels, which is estimated to generate \$313,425 in fire special tax annually for, and specifically paid to the City Fire Department. Groveland Community Services District/Groveland Fire Department contains 4087 developed and undeveloped parcels, estimated to generate \$552,525 annually to fund the Groveland Fire Department services. As previously stated, fire special tax money generated in one department/District area cannot be allocated by the Fire Authority or County Tax Collector to another department or to the county.

Where Can I Find More Information on Measure V?

More information on the Tuolumne County Fire Authority and Measure V can be found on the Authority website: <https://www.gcsd.org/tuolumne-county-fire-authority> . Also please watch for notification of virtual and in-person meetings where information on the Measure can be shared and public opinions heard. This document will be updated on a regular basis as needed to address questions raised by persons wishing to educate themselves on Measure V.

What Accountability Measures Are In Place For Measure V?

All meetings and decisions of the Tuolumne County Fire Authority and its member Departments and Districts are open to the public, and all records, budgets, expenditures and actions of each is a public record available to the public. An annual fire special tax report is required to be prepared and filed with each fire department, and made readily available to the public. The financial accounting of each fire department entity receiving the fire special tax must be in compliance with specific, legally required accounting principles with regular financial audits conducted by independent accounting firms.

If this Measure Passes, When Will It Go Into Effect And How Long Will It Be In Place?

Measure V will go into effect July 1, 2021 and be levied beginning on the 2021/22 tax rolls. The tax will remain in effect until no longer needed to fund fire and emergency response services in the county, or until repealed by the registered voters in the county.

What happens if my area approves this measure but others don't?

To pass, the measure MUST receive a two-thirds Yes vote amongst all ballots received from registered voters in the TCFA's fire districts. If a two-thirds majority is not achieved, the measure fails and the tax cannot be implemented.

What will happen if Measure V doesn't pass?

The answer will be different for each of the fire department members of the TCFA. For the Groveland Fire Department, this means that expenses will continue to exceed property tax revenue; funding will not be available to replace fire engines, with an average age of 23 years or expensive emergency response equipment. As detailed in the [Groveland Fire Master Plan](#)¹ completed in 2020 by Citygate Consulting, if additional revenue is not received by GCSD for fire services, GCSD will not have adequate funds within the next few years to continue the current level of station staffing, with an option to consider discontinuing fire services altogether.

Why aren't the entities doing separate measures?

The fire departments in the county are all struggling financially and rely on each other for mutual aid backup. The fire chiefs chose to work together through the formation of the TCFA so that all departments remain viable. The process for placing a measure on the ballot is costly and complicated and the chiefs have clearly stated that our fire services are only as strong as the weakest link; and they all need funding.

If Measure V passes, will my fire department lose funding from other sources?

No, there will be no loss of funding. In fact, Measure V will open the door to additional grant funding by providing dollars for better planning and required grant matching funds.

What is the purpose of the 2% annual increase on this tax?

The expense of operating a fire department increases every year, and if the measure did not provide for an increase in the tax to cover cost inflation, then funding may not be available to accomplish the purposes for which Measure V was proposed. Fire Department costs that increase annually include staffing, training and compliance with state mandates, equipment, fuel, insurance and vehicle/facility maintenance.

Why aren't Twain Harte, Strawberry and MiWuk/Sugar Pine Districts participating?

Twain Harte, Strawberry, and MiWuk have all been proactive in securing dedicated funding to help sustain their fire districts and improve services through similar tax measures.

¹ See Fiscal Review Summary starting on page 90 of the master plan, Findings 24, 25 and 26 on page 91 and Recommendations 5 and 6 on page 91 and 92