



# CITY OF BLYTHE

235 North Broadway • Blythe, California 92225  
Phone (760) 922-6161 • Fax (760) 922-4938

August 21, 2018

Riverside County Grand Jury  
P.O. Box 829  
Riverside, CA 92502

**Re: 2017-2018 Grand Jury Report: CAL Fire/Riverside County Fire Department/Palo Verde Valley Fire Protection Issues.**

Forwarded herewith, as adopted by the Blythe City Council on August 14, 2018, is the City's response to the 2017-2018 Grand Jury Report issued June 14, 2018 and released to the public after the close of business June 18, 2018.

**Grand Jury Findings:**

1. Riverside County Fire Station #43, located in Blythe, is unable to sufficiently support the vehicles and equipment assigned there. The 2014-2015 Grand Jury recommended the replacement of Station #43 or relocating it to a site closer to the Colorado River. The station is not large enough to accommodate all vehicles and equipment, and is therefore inadequate.

In the 2016 commissioned independent study by TriData of RCFD resources, several recommendations were made including the closure of Station #43 and consolidating its personnel with Station #45. The study noted that few emergency responses were required of Battalion 8 during the study period, and that few were structure fires of major emergencies.

The 2017-2018 Grand Jury visited three stations in Battalion 8 and observed the fire engine assigned to Station #43 was parked in the driveway and the rescue vehicle was on the street. This exposes the vehicles to extreme weather, tampering, and vandalism. The sun and heat causes deterioration of the paint, decals and rubber seals on the engine and pumps. Fine dust infiltrates essential electrical parts. This exposure of RCFD Vehicles to the elements and to passersby on the street, including children and vagrants, is a serious problem especially when considering that a life-saving medical supply kit is onboard Engine #43, as it is on all County fire engines. The Grand Jury queried personnel of various ranks and failed to obtain a consistent answer to the question of whether the medical kits were even securely locked while onboard the vehicles.

**City's Response:** None required as the findings relate solely to RCFD.

2. The City of Blythe maintains a historic fire department which responds to calls within the City. The Fire Chief, or his designee, assembles a team and provides guidance when a call for emergency service is received. After the volunteers arrive at the station, a firefighting team-which typically consists of a Captain, Engineer and Fire Fighter is dispatched to the emergency.

Public reports from the Blythe Fire Department for the period of October 2017 through April 2018 indicate that the Department received 221 calls for service. More than half of those calls were not fire-related, but for public assistance, rescues, or medical aid. The Blythe Fire Department is staffed with volunteers who are trained Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) who can only provide Basic Life Support (BLS) assistance. They are not certified paramedics and cannot provide Advance Life Support (ALS) measures, if needed. In the event ALS measures are required, EMTs must wait for the arrival of an ambulance which is staffed with a certified paramedic.

Blythe pays an annual salary to the Fire Chief and the Deputy Fire Chief. The volunteer firemen receive a flat payment for each incident response and an additional payment when response to an incident exceeds one hour. While this may appear to be a cost saving in relation to a fully-staffed, 24-hour RCFD contract team, Blythe is spending approximately \$444,000 annually for volunteer personnel and the costs of operation, maintenance, and purchase of fire vehicles. Public records indicate that at least \$220,000 was paid to volunteers in 2016.

The Blythe Fire Department has old equipment which is subject to reliability issues. There is a newer model engine (2015), but the other two fire engines are more than 15 years old, an age when most fire companies reduce front-line use of engines and move them to back up use. At fifteen years of age, engine reliability is questionable and servicing issues can be expensive. The historic vehicles include a 1923 fire engine and a 1975 truck.

**Correction:** The Fire Chief is the only Fire employee who receives an annual salary.

**City's Response:** Although there is a Captain, Engineer and at least one Firefighter on the responding team, there are typically 5-6 fire personnel on each fire engine that responds from the station. It is typical to have up to three Blythe Fire Engines on scene. With 33 trained fire personnel, The Fire Department is able to dispatch as many firemen as necessary for every emergency situation. The Department is comprised of a Fire Chief, Assistant Chief, Deputy Chief/Training Officer, 5 Captains, 7 Engineers and 18 Firemen. These 33 fire personnel are on-call around the clock to respond to emergencies. Whereas CalFire/RCFD will respond with one engine and three fire personnel until Engines from other stations within Battalion 8 are dispatched to arrive.

The Blythe Fire Department responds to a number of medical aid calls. What is not stated in this report however, is the number of ALS calls in which no ambulance was on scene. The Fire Department is dispatched in most medical aid calls to assist the ambulance service. In this case, paramedics are already on scene.

The City pays its fire personnel an hourly rate to respond to fires, attend training sessions and drills. Paying RCFD for the same service would cost the City over a million dollars annually. The City realizes a great savings by utilizing the services of the Blythe Fire Department. It would not be cost effective for the City to contract with RCFD for services already provided by the Blythe Fire Department.

The Fire Engines utilized by the Blythe Fire Department are certified annually by Hughs. The Engines are maintained in working order and are reliable. There has never been an instance in which the Fire Department was unable to respond to an emergency due to reliability issues with the equipment. The 1923 engine has not been in service since the 50's and is maintained for parades and similar events. The 1973 truck is used to bring water and supplies to firemen during fires, it is not used to respond to emergencies.

3. RCFD Station #43 is located less than one-quarter of a mile from the Blythe Fire Department. Station #43 is staffed with a full complement of firefighting professionals, including certified paramedics. Since there is no formal agreement between RCFD and Blythe, except for the standard mutual aid agreement that exists between all local jurisdictions, Station #43 does not respond to emergency calls within the city limits. The Grand Jury concluded that available and certified paramedics and other first responders are not being utilized to the benefit of the residents of the Palo Verde Valley or the City of Blythe.

**City's Response:** The City of Blythe also has a full complement of firefighting professionals trained to serve and protect the City of Blythe and its residents. Prior to 2012, an Agreement was in place for Riverside County to provide fire and medical related services within various annexed areas of the City. In 2011 the City was advised that Station 43 was likely to close due to a \$9.9 million budget cut to the Fire budget. The City received a letter from County Fire Chief John Hawkins advising that the County was officially terminating the agreement for services in the annexed areas of the City. At that time it was estimated the cancellation of this agreement would save the City \$60,000 per year which was being paid to the County for providing services in the annexed areas. As the possible closure of Station #43 is once again being discussed, it would not be in the City's best interest to rely on the County for medical aid services or establish an automatic aid agreement with a station that may be closing. The other Stations in Battalion 8 are all a considerable distance from the City proper, making response times inadequate for Blythe residents.

#### **Grand Jury Recommendations:**

1. The Board of Supervisors (BOS) , along with the RCFD, should review the prior recommendations from the 2014-2015 Grand Jury report and the independent 2016 TriData, LLC, Final Report concerning the utility of Station #43, and take appropriate actions. RCFD should relocate Station #43, or close it, and consider consolidating operations with Station #45

**City's Response:** No response necessary.

2. The City of Blythe review the quality of service which they can provide with a volunteer service in light of the large number of medical assist calls within the City limits. Review the level of fire/emergency services if the County were to deactivate or move Station #43

**City's Response:** There would be zero impact to the City and its residents if the County were to deactivate or move Station #43. The City of Blythe is confident in the level of service provided by its volunteer Fire Department. The Blythe Fire Department has responded to all calls for service including all medical aid calls in the City since 2011 when RCFD terminated our service agreement. Since that time the City's fire employees have completed extensive training and continue to be a professional operation capable of protecting the residents of Blythe.

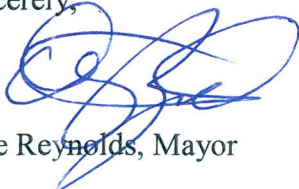
3. The City of Blythe form a partnership with the County of Riverside to develop a comprehensive fire and medical assistance protection plan that would better utilize existing resources and best serve the residents of the Palo Verde Valley including the City of Blythe.

**City's Response:** The current mutual aid agreement has served both City and County residents. As always, the City will respond to assist the County and the County will assist the City when necessary. At this time there is no need to have an automatic aid agreement. This would be costly for the City. The only purpose it would serve would be for CalFire and RCFD to justify the need for Station #43 to be open and operational. An automatic aid agreement would greatly increase their number of calls for service. It would not be a benefit to the residents of Blythe to pay for extra fire personnel to be on scene when Blythe Fire Department personnel are already trained and ready to respond to those calls.

### **Conclusion:**

The City of Blythe appreciates the work of the Grand Jury as well as the opportunity to comment on its finding and recommendations. The Blythe City Council respectfully requests information related to how the Grand Jury came to investigate this matter, and/or who asked the Grand Jury to investigate this matter. The City also requests a copy of the County of Riverside and CAL Fire's response this Report.

Sincerely,



Dale Reynolds, Mayor