

Defining the problem: Overview



At present the Felton Fire Protection District faces many problems stemming from either long-term misallocation, under/over utilized resources or underfunded needs.

Felton Fire presently is suffering from a crisis of inability to staff the district in a readily reliable format. This is due to both the incident call volume and a lack of available local volunteers able to keep pace with the increase in calls over other districts in the area.

This staffing problem has been compounded by the loss of all historical institutional knowledge from the line personnel and the mass firings that took place under a brief contract for services.

The District has essentially lost both its prior history and knowledge, its present identity, and future objectives< leaving the district stuck in the moment having to adapt to its environment on the fly. Doing so has conditioned the district to be in a continued state of reactivity, instead of a state of proactivity and anticipation. Such mindsets are ineffective for emergency operations and are dangerous to all.

Below is an evaluation by Chief Blum upon assuming the position of interim Fire Chief and assessing the years 2022-2024 titled Leadership, Line personal, Board action

(Where we were)

Leadership - A succession of short-term Fire Chiefs has led to only fuel the chaos that at times has surrounded the office.

The district has had 5 chiefs in the last 4 years. With each chief has come a change in priorities and shift in agency values and objectives. Chiefs at times have been at odds with the line personnel leading to resentment and unhealthy attitudes that have crippled daily operations in the past. Holding the physical response to incidents hostage by the resources available, unwilling to commit to solutions in an effort to maintain control and power in the labor/management roles. A lack of funding to find a permanent Fire Chief has led to the Board of Directors having to make concessions as to who can and has filled the role in the past.

Line Personnel – Line personnel consisting of Firefighters, Engineers, and Captains both in volunteer and paid capacities have worked for the district. When lower call volumes were present the district could find readily reliable staffing with a true volunteer staffing. Volunteers would respond from home to answer the call and address the emergency. With an increase in demand came a reduction in response times and numbers of responders leading to an overburdened volunteer force. To counteract the reduced number of volunteer responders, the district sought to make up the difference in response personnel with fulltime employees. Regretfully the district failed to plan accordingly in both the financial and operational oversight rolls. In short order what transpired was a fracture within the daily operations between the paid and volunteer staff as well as the Fire Chief. Coupled with an ever-increasing call volume and inconsistent leadership the situation evolved into a state of dysfunction and at times chaos.

Board Action – During this timeline the Board of Directors was held at arm's length by both the management (Fire Chief) and line personal. The Board was left to play referee between the two parties who were vying for power and influence with the Board collectively and with specific members.

It is my personal opinion that multiple Fire Chief's specifically withheld or failed to realize the true nature of the environment they were conducting daily operations under in an effort to show strength or avoid criticism for the inability to manage and regain control of the fire district they were hired to manage. Ultimately the Board of Directors was not provided an accurate account of the environment and exigency of conditions that needed to be addressed.

Ultimately the factors above lead to an almost complete crippling of services and district operations were it not for calculated decisive decisions and a restructuring of the organization and priorities.

(Where we are now)

Specifics:

At present the Felton fire District is staffed with only 22 volunteers. Those volunteers work twelve-hour shifts to provide reliable repetitive staffing for the district and the community. Minimum staffing is set presently at two Firefighters but on most days, there are three or four Firefighters available for response. Gone is the tension and dysfunction of previous management. A clear chain of command has been reestablished. Respect and

inclusion have been made as cornerstones of the new expectations for all. Promotions have taken place to fill vacant roles and provide a clear succession plan, administrative and operational roles have been identified.

Collectively, the previous fire district would not recognize the present one except by name. Gone is the power struggle, the divisiveness, and lack of community obligation that so permeated previous times.

Emergency response to the community has greatly improved as well as involvement and visibility. At present our Firefighters have weekly engagement with new members of the community and interact with them on a personal level, something unheard of just a few short years before.

With the shift work has come the ability to bring back stability to district operations and see where any shortcomings may lie before impacting members of the public. It has allowed the District to guarantee the ability to have firefighters available 24 hours a day, something most other volunteer fire districts in our area still cannot do.

We have transitioned from an institution without vision and direction to an organization with a combined collective vision for the future. The future of not only the District but for the community as well.

Without recognizing our mistakes in the past, we are destined to repeat them.

Without a competent Fire Chief, the district cannot lead.

Without reliable staff the district cannot operate.

Without funding the district cannot provide either Fire Chief nor staff.

And without community support the district can do nothing.

(Where we intend to go)

With that said the Board of Directors has identified that the sole decision that they have full control over is the adoption and appointment of the Fire Chief.

With competent and reliable leadership will come the future of the District. As such, the hinge pin of transformation for the district will be the next permanent Fire Chief. The Board is committed to seeking out the best possible individual and retaining them for the future. Without consistent and long-term leadership, vision, budget and continuity of operations will suffer.

With selection of the right Chief will come the application and hiring of additional staff. Staff that understands that not only are they Firefighters, but they belong to and are responsible for a community. An understanding that what comes first are the needs of those around us. That through taking care of others we will ultimately take care of ourselves. With these new rolls will be the reliable, responsible and receptive future of the Felton Fire District.

Presently your fire district represents these qualities to each of you as individuals but collectively we are asking that you consider supporting the fire district so that we can retain these individuals, values and services.

Each face you see in a Felton Fire uniform is there because they want to help you, they do it without pay, they do it without promise for the future. Because they all know that without you there is no future for Felton Fire. In their actions alone they show that by supporting you; they hope that you will support them.

These new funds for the district will be used specifically to rebuild the District, and to provide full-time employment that will ensure stability and growth for the future.

The positions include:

Fire Chief – who will skillfully lead the Fire District, plan and prepare budgets, map the future and seek out constructive ways to responsibly manage the district and provide for our community.

Fire Captain – one of three who will lead the day-to-day shift operations and provide initial command on incidents as well as administer specialized programs that enhance the services to the community.

Engineer – one of three who will competently drive and operate the apparatus as well as act as second in command, perform mentorship for the next generation of firefighters and be assigned other district areas of responsibility.

Firefighter – one of three who will complete all tasks asked of them safely, competently and professionally. Provide community interaction by being attentive to the needs of those around them.

Administrative support – Who will provide for all the reoccurring and administrative duties of the District. They will be respectful, attentive and possess the ability to do their job with minimal oversight.

These new roles will enable the district to address the approximately 900 calls a year that the district presently receives as well as provide enhanced services to the community of Felton.

With funding comes the expectation that the community deserves more. When you ask someone to do something for free you take what you can get. When you pay someone, you have expectations of what you will receive. That holds true for the community as well. The community should expect a higher level of dedication and service. More professionalism, and more individualized attention. The ability of our District to pay a competitive wage will secure our employees for the long-term, cementing our future and rebuilding the institutional knowledge lost under previous management.

Costs and timeline:

Attached are the salaries and budgets for the next 5 years for the positions identified.

Those salaries and budgets show that the requested amount is not only sustainable but optimal for the long term. Responsibility is inserted into everything we do in the fire service. Responsibility to oneself, one's crew, one's department and now community.

Respectfully I ask you to be responsible for the services our community receives daily and help fund your fire district.

Included is a timeline outlining the phase-in period for the funding and the hiring of employees, the enhanced training for our volunteers and benchmarks for community expectations.

Conclusion:

In conclusion as your Interim Fire Chief I ask that you seek out answers to any questions that you have, that you base your decisions off of facts, not speculation or conjecture.

That the decisions you make are appropriate for you and your individual circumstances.

I hope you will take into account the great steps we have been able to take in such a short time. From where we were just a few short years ago to where we are now. The 24 hour service now provided, increases in staffing, training, morale, and accountability, all while having to do more with less funding.

With your help we could truly see the Felton Fire District become a pillar of fire service in the San Lorenzo Valley and a strong representation of our communities desires to put their own safety and the safety of others first.

I thank you for taking the time to read this release and your considerations for our parcel tax measure. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me directly if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,
Isaac Blum

Isaac Blum

Interim Fire Chief, Felton Fire Protection District
firechief@feltonfire.com
District cell (831) 252-8001

