

... But fire consolidation is not the answer

By Bill Horn

During my 13 years as 5th District county supervisor, I have witnessed disasters. I was chairman of the Board of Supervisors on Sept. 11, 2001, and have now seen two of the deadliest fires in our county's history come and go.

After the devastation of the Cedar and Paradise fires in 2003, my colleagues and I on the Board of Supervisors acted decisively to correct problems we encountered with our emergency notification system and ineffective communication and coordination between our fire agencies.

At the county, we set clear goals and accomplished almost all of them. Our most recent fire response efforts showed tremendously improved communication and coordination among our fire agencies, and our reverse 911 system and our helicopters saved countless people and homes. Our system worked to near perfection, but as the devastation from these fires serves to remind us, there is always room for improvement when it comes to protecting

the public. However, consolidating our county's fire services would not represent any such improvement for the people of my district.

The fire service consolidation proposal that will come before the San Diego Local Agency Formation Commission on Monday will suggest the creation of a more centralized, bureaucratic firefighting institution — a "paper fire department"

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— that would eventually move critical firefighting resources out of North County and into South County. I think there is a better way. That is why Supervisor Ron Roberts and I are exploring an alternate structure in order to bring forward a proposal to the Board of Supervisors that would more effectively utilize our taxpayer dollars to enhance regional fire protection.

My district contains some of the

most fire-prone territory in the United States, as the Poomacha, Witch Creek and Rice Canyon fires demonstrated. Yet approving the consolidation means closing stations, removing resources and negatively impacting volunteer firefighters in North County. It was our volunteers who proved last month that they know their territories better than anyone, because they live

where they serve and consequently take the fight against these fires personally. We cannot afford to lose our volunteers.

Nearly every fire agency in the 5th District does not support the LAFCO consolidation, and I will not support it, either. Although the budget estimates for a consolidated fire department are likely too low, at \$24 million consolidation would not come cheap. Although LAFCO

hopes to cover half these potential costs with one-time grants and a potential ballot measure, the other half will need to come from the county. Having seen how well our system worked last month, it is my belief that any county contribution that LAFCO requests for fire service consolidation should be put into new helicopters, equipment and training for our firefighters, not sunk into

bureaucracy.

I am certain we have not seen the last big fire in San Diego County, but I am confident that our current system works very well. During my years as supervisor I have built up the agencies, stations and firefighters of my district with new equipment and resources, and I am not finished yet. I simply cannot support a bureaucratic "fix" for a system that isn't broken.

Horn is a member of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors.