



**Santa Cruz County Fire**  
*County Service Area 48 (CSA 48)*

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **Who is Santa Cruz County Fire and what is County Service Area 48?**

The Santa Cruz County Fire Department serves specific areas of unincorporated Santa Cruz County known as "County Service Area 48" (CSA 48). CSA 48 includes the communities of Bonny Doon, Davenport, Loma Prieta, Corralitos, Las Cumbres and the wider South Skyline area.

Santa Cruz County Fire serves a population of just over 24,000 residents, covering 286 square miles in the rural areas of Santa Cruz County. Santa Cruz County Fire responds to over 2,200 service calls per year, including for structure, wildland, and vehicle fires, emergency medical calls, traffic collisions, entrapments and rescues, industrial accidents and hazardous materials incidents. In addition, Santa Cruz County Fire provides fire prevention, community education, emergency preparedness and other services relating to the protection of lives and property.

Santa Cruz County Fire is governed by the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors. It operates 10 fire stations, 5 are staffed by a combination of local professional and volunteer firefighters and 5 are staffed by CAL FIRE firefighters. As a part of the statewide mutual aid agreement during high fire danger season (June through October), CAL FIRE responds to wildland fire emergencies throughout all of California. This proposed assessment would fund the paid/volunteer fire stations and services.

### **Why should I pay attention to our local fire service?**

Santa Cruz County Fire cannot maintain the current level of service in CSA 48 to protect you, your family and your property without additional funding to restore paid firefighter staffing levels to meet State recommended standards, and to replace aging fire engines and lifesaving emergency and rescue equipment.



Recent devastating California wildfires, including the Camp Fire, Mendocino Complex Fires, Woolsey Fire, Tubbs Fire in Sonoma County and Soberanes Fire among others, provide a stark reminder that our Santa Cruz County community is at risk when a fire, natural disaster, or other emergency strikes. Much of Santa Cruz County is comprised of heavily forested, steep terrain and is considered to be at high fire risk, and the county experienced a number of "close calls" with potentially devastating wildfires in recent years.

### **What challenges is Santa Cruz County Fire facing?**

- Santa Cruz County Fire has 25% fewer paid firefighters on staff today than we did 10 years ago and a 45% reduction of volunteer firefighters (down from 110 to 60). Meanwhile, our number of emergency calls has grown steadily – up 22% since 2010.
- For the safety of the public and first responders, the State recommends at least 3 paid and 1 volunteer firefighters per engine. Currently, Santa Cruz County Fire can only afford 2 paid and 1 volunteer firefighters per engine.

- To enter a burning structure or rescue a trapped victim, the law requires 4 firefighters: 2 firefighters to enter the structure and 2 outside for backup (the law has an exception to this rule in the event there is a known rescue). Funding for a 3rd paid firefighter means that, along with 1 volunteer firefighter, we would have the 4 firefighters required to quickly enter and perform a rescue or put out a fire.
- Local fire stations are so short-staffed that when multiple emergency calls come in, we don't have the staff to respond. More than 56 times in 2018, all County Fire firefighters were out on emergency incidents, leaving no one available to respond to the next emergency call.
- The American Heart Association states that brain deterioration begins between four and six minutes after a person stops breathing. The average 9-1-1 response time for Santa Cruz County Fire - CSA 48 area is approximately 10 minutes. A third firefighter and reliable equipment allows your fire department to provide faster patient care and reduce response times.
- With climate change and drought, wildland fires are getting larger, faster and deadlier. We need to make sure we have the resources and staff to respond quickly to structure fires, wildland fires, and medical emergencies when they happen.

Without additional funds to address appropriate staffing levels and needed safety equipment, the County could be faced with closing a fire station and redeploying resources to remaining stations, resulting in slower 9-1-1 response times in many areas of rural Santa Cruz County.

#### **Why does it matter if there is a delay in 911 response times?**

The American Heart Association states that brain deterioration begins between four and six minutes after a person stops breathing. The average 9-1-1 response time for Santa Cruz County Fire - CSA 48 area is approximately 10 minutes. A third firefighter and reliable equipment allows your fire department to provide faster patient care and reduce response times. If Santa Cruz County were forced to close a fire station, response times would increase.



#### **Where does the Santa Cruz County Fire protection funding come from?**

Santa Cruz County Fire protection funding comes a fixed portion of local property taxes plus the CSA 48 fee shown on your local property tax bill. These critical funds pay for all of our fire engines, rescue vehicles, and firefighter protective gear, as well as training and administrative support provided by CAL FIRE. These funds also ensure continuous staffing at CAL FIRE stations in each of our five areas during the winter (non-fire) season.

#### **Why is a funding measure needed?**

County Fire is primarily funded by contributions from local property taxes, funding from an existing bene t assessment, and inspection and plan review fees. For about 10 years, funding levels have been insufficient for County Fire to operate at appropriate service levels. For example, in 2008, due to increasing costs, staffing was reduced from 3 paid and 1 volunteer firefighters per engine ("4 on a truck") down to 2 paid and 1 volunteer firefighters per engine ("3 on a truck") during non-high re season (November through May). However, to enter a burning structure or rescue a trapped victim, State safety standards require 4 firefighters at the scene with 2 firefighters entering the structure and 2 remaining outside to support - known as the "2 in, 2 out rule" (the law has an exception to this rule in the event there is a known rescue). Additional funding to return to a "4 on a truck" capacity means County Fire would have the 4 firefighters required to quickly enter and perform a rescue or put out a fire.

### **Why is Santa Cruz County Fire - CSA 48 underfunded?**

- Since 1978 and Proposition 13, the County Fire Department has undergone major changes. At that time the winter/non-fire season period was predominantly covered under an "Amador" contract with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE), wherein CAL FIRE largely subsidized the salaries of the CAL FIRE fire fighters who staffed the stations. Because of this subsidy, County Fire's annual expenses were less, resulting in its post-Proposition 13 allocation of property tax revenue being significantly lower than career fire departments with 24/7 staffing (e.g., for 2009-10 County Fire receives approximately .51% of the 1% total collected, whereas other career fire districts in the County receive on average 2.55%).
- Due to full implementation of the Fair Labor Standards Act which made the Amador (State-subsidized) contract unfeasible for CAL FIRE, the personnel portion of the Santa Cruz County Amador contract was phased out, and, in 2006-07, fully transitioned into a "Schedule A" contract which requires that Santa Cruz County pay the full cost of the firefighters provided under the contract. CAL FIRE continues to provide operators (generally fire captains) at each station at no cost to the County, and greatly subsidizes the chief officers who oversee the fire department.
- Changing industry and safety standards, regulatory requirements, and the aforementioned transition to a Schedule A contract, have all resulted in ever rising costs for County Fire.

### **Why now?**

Due to the increased level of fire and emergency calls, there is a critical need for additional funding to meet industry safety standards by restoring the number of firefighters to three per engine to be better prepared for large-scale wildfires and emergencies.

### **When were the most recent fires in SCCF - CSA 48?**

- BEAR FIRE (November 2018) 10 acres burned and 1 structure destroyed
- BEAR FIRE (October 2017) 391 acres burned and 4 structures destroyed
- LOMA FIRE (September 2016) 4,474 acres burned and 28 structures destroyed

### **What is a Prop 218 Benefit Assessment Ballot Proceeding?**

A sustainable and reliable option available to the County is to seek community support for a local property tax assessment, a Proposition 218 ballot proceeding, where property owners are the "voters" who decide on the measure. This allows your local Santa Cruz County Fire Department to meet safety standards and replace aging equipment so our firefighters

can continue to provide lifesaving fire and emergency protection services. The proposed funding would be an annual assessment on each property in the Santa Cruz County Fire – CSA 48.



Prop 218 Ballot Measures require a weighted ballot. Each ballot is weighted by the amount of assessment it represents (see benefit assessment calculation below). In other words, if one property owner of two homes receives a ballot for \$297.44 in proposed assessment (\$148.72 per home times two) and another property owner of one home receives a ballot for \$148.72 in proposed assessment, the first property owner's ballot will count for twice that of the second property owner because the first property owner's ballot is for twice the proposed assessment amount.

## How will the funds from the proposed measure be used?

- **Maintain** the quality of local fire protection and emergency services
- **Ensure** quick response times to 9-1-1 emergencies
- **Repair, upgrade or replace** outdated fire engines and lifesaving emergency and rescue equipment
- **Be Better Prepared** for large-scale wildfires

## What if the proposed assessment is not approved?

Without additional funds to address appropriate staffing levels and needed safety equipment, the County could be faced with closing a fire station and redeploying resources to remaining stations, resulting in slower 9-1-1 response times in many areas of rural Santa Cruz County.



## If a Prop 218 Benefit Assessment is approved by property owners, how much will it cost me?

California law requires that special assessments for improved fire protection services are based upon the calculated “special benefit” conferred on a property.

The special benefit for each parcel is calculated based upon these four factors:

1. **Parcel-related fire risk factors:** Likelihood of fire ignition based upon parcel use.
2. **Structure replacement value factors:** Relative cost to replace structure on parcel.
3. **Fire hazard zone risk factors:** Very High, High Critical, Mitigatable Critical or None as designated by CAL FIRE.
4. **Proximity (travel time) risk factors:** Relative travel time from the closest appropriate responding fire station.

The average single-family resident would pay about \$148.72 per year, or \$12.39 a month, for fire services. This benefit assessment would provide a stable, local source of funding for Santa Cruz County Fire. An Engineer’s Report describing the proposed improvements, method and basis upon which the amount of the proposed assessment was calculated, special benefits, budgets and proposed assessment for each parcel is available for review at County of Santa Cruz, General Services Department at 701 Ocean Street, Santa Cruz.

## How can we be assured that the funds will be spent properly?

- ✓ Funds from this proposed assessment can only be used for fire safety services, including maintaining the quality of local fire protection services, ensuring quick response times to 9-1-1 emergencies, repairing, upgrading, or replacing aging fire engines and lifesaving emergency and rescue equipment, and restoring the number of local firefighters needed to keep our community safe within the Santa Cruz County Fire CSA 48 boundaries. **Under the law, the funds cannot be used for any other purpose.**
- ✓ No funds from this assessment can go to the County’s General Fund. All funding generated by the assessment under consideration would go directly to Santa Cruz County Fire – CSA 48.
- ✓ The State cannot take this funding away.

**EXAMPLE CALCULATIONS:** Based upon Annual Base rate = \$148.72 per year

**CASE #1:** SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCE IN HIGH VERY HAZARD ZONE WITH A 10 MINUTE TRAVEL TIME

Assessment Rate = Annual Base SFE Rate \* 1.000 \* 1.20 \* 1.05 = \$187.39 per yr.

**CASE #2:**

SINGLE FAMILY RESIDENCE IN MITIGATABLE CRITICAL HAZARD ZONE WITH A 28 MINUTE TRAVEL TIME

Assessment Rate = Annual Base SFE Rate \* 1.000 \* 1.10 \* 0.95 = \$155.4124 per yr.

**Case #3:**

COMMERCIAL PROPERTY ON 2 ACRES IN HIGH VERY RISK ZONE WITH A 10 MINUTE TRAVEL TIME

Assessment Rate = Annual Base SFE Rate \* 7.2971 \* 2 acres \* 1.20 \* 1.05 = 2,732.74

**CASE #4:**

VACANT LOT NOT IN A HAZARD ZONE WITH A 4 MINUTE TRAVEL TIME Assessment Rate = Annual Base SFE Rate \* .2336 \* 1.00 \* 1.15 = \$39.95 per yr.

\* The relative special benefit for each property type is calculated based upon the “Single Family Equivalent” or “SFE” approach in which the benefit for a typical single-family home is assigned the value of 1.0 and other property types vary accordingly.

#### **What is required for a Prop 218 Measure to pass?**

At least 50% +1 of the voters who cast their ballots in the election must vote in favor of the measure for it to be approved. Prop 218 Ballot Measures require a weighted ballot. Each ballot is weighted by the amount of assessment it represents. In other words, if one property owner of two homes receives a ballot for \$297.44 in proposed assessment (\$148.72 per home times two) and another property owner of one home receives a ballot for \$148.72 in proposed assessment, the first property owner’s ballot will count for twice that of the second property owner because the first property owner’s ballot is for twice the proposed assessment amount.

#### **How is a Prop 218 election different from other elections?**

- In a Prop 218 election only property owners (those who will pay the tax) get to vote. In other general elections all registered voters whether they will pay the tax or not get to vote on the measure.
- Prop 218 needs to be approved by 50% +1 of the voters who cast their ballots. Similar to a sales tax measure. Other types of taxes like a parcel tax require 2/3rds or 66.6% support to pass.
- Similar to a school bond measure on your property tax bill, each property owner pays a different amount based on an assessment per 100k of assessed value of your house. California law requires that Prop 218 special assessments for improved fire protection services are based upon the calculated “special benefit” conferred on a property. The four factors are described above.
- A Prop 218 is a weighted ballot as described above.
- Property owners will receive their ballot in the mail with the amount they will pay printed on the ballot.



**How does the number of fire stations and staffing affect my insurance rates?**

The Insurance Standards Organization (ISO) determines insurance premiums based on multiple criteria. "50% [of the ISO rating] comes from the quality of your local fire department including staffing levels, training and proximity of the firehouse." Keeping our fire stations staffed to industry standards and open 24/7 year-round can help maintain our current ISO ratings.

**Doesn't the State or County provide funding for this?**

Funding available from the State or County is minimal. With a growing demand for fire protection and lifesaving services and a limited operating budget, it's becoming problematic to meet our community's increasing demand for fire protection and lifesaving calls.

**Don't we already pay a \$150 Fire Prevention Fee?**

No. The California Fire Prevention Fee was suspended on July 2017.

**Don't we receive Measure G and Prop 172 funds?**

No. Unfortunately, Santa Cruz County Fire - CSA 48 does not receive any funds from Measure G or Prop 172. All funding generated by the Prop 218 benefit assessment under consideration would go directly to Santa Cruz County Fire – CSA 48. No funds from this assessment can go to the County's General Fund. The State cannot take this funding away.

**Are there more house fires in the winter?**

According to the American Red Cross, house fires increase between the fall and winter months with peaks in December and January.

**When should Fire emergency response vehicles be decommissioned?**

Fire emergency response vehicles need to be decommissioned after 20 years for continued reliability and safety. Currently, 3 out of 7 CSA 48 fire engines have been in service for at least 25 years.

**Who makes the final decision on a local Prop 218 benefit assessment measure?**

The locally elected Santa Cruz Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 in support of calling for an election at the Board of Supervisor meeting on Oct. 22, 2019. The Board initiated the balloting process and ballots will be mailed to property owners in CSA 48 on November 5, 2019. Property owners in CSA 48 will have the opportunity to vote for or against the proposal. Ballots can be mailed in by January 13, 2020 or hand deliver at the public hearing by 10:00am on January 14, 2020 at the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors' Chambers, 701 Ocean Street, Room 525, Santa Cruz, CA 95060. Only official ballots which are signed and marked with the property owner's support or opposition will be counted. You are invited to attend the public hearing. Tabulation of the returned ballots will commence after the close of the public input portion of the hearing, and the results of the tabulation are expected to be announced at the following board meeting later that same day.

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**What services are covered under our current Fire Flow Unit Assessment?**

- Two firefighter per engine (for the safety of the public and first-responders, the State recommends at least three firefighters per engine).
- Operations in CSA 48 with five year-round volunteer fire stations in cooperation with five corresponding state fire stations.
- Contracts with CAL FIRE to keep the state fire stations in CSA 48 open during non-fire season to ensure year-round fire protection and emergency response services.
- Limited weed abatement, firefighter training and administrative support provided by CAL FIRE.

**How much do I pay for current services in CSA 48?**

\$79.78 per fire flow unit, per year. The average single-family resident pays for two fire flow units per year.

**Will the current CSA 48 fee go away if the new one passes?**

If the measure is passed, the new special benefit will be in addition to the current CSA 48 fee. The new fee would be for additional services not currently covered under the current fee. As an example, for an average single-family home (see Case #2 above) this would be two fire flow units at \$79.78 each, plus the average new fee of \$148.72 for a total of \$308.28. As noted previously, the actual amount for the new assessment will differ for each property and will be shown clearly on each ballot.

**Where to go for additional information?**

For more information go to our website at: [www.SantaCruzCountyFire.com](http://www.SantaCruzCountyFire.com), email Chief Larkin at [CSA48feedback@gmail.com](mailto:CSA48feedback@gmail.com).