

Background



Photo Credit: Rural/Metro

Rural Metro Fire and Emergency Services have been serving the Carefree community for more than a half-century. Initially, the Fire and Emergency Service model in Carefree required private household subscriptions with Rural Metro which averaged about \$750 per household. However, in 2007, the Town eliminated the need for these private subscriptions when it began a Town-wide master contract with Rural Metro. Under this modified service model, the Town built and equipped a fire house and apparatus and contracted with Rural Metro for labor. In order to fund the annual operational expenses associated with this new master contract, the Town increased its sales tax for retail products purchased within the community from 2% to 3% and placed the revenue in a dedicated account named the "Fire Fund" to cover the associated expenses of the master contract.

External Influences:

In May of 2020, in neighboring Cave Creek, as a result of two large-scale wildland fires and one commercial structural fire, Cave Creek decided to move away from their ongoing private subscription model with Rural Metro to a master contract with the Daisy Mountain Fire Department. This shift in their service model permitted Cave Creek to qualify for the regional emergency dispatch system called Automatic Aid. Rural Metro has not been permitted to participate in this regional dispatch program and thus, they operate under a less reliable, discretionary system when additional emergency support is needed. This discretionary system, called Mutual Aid, requires Rural Metro to request support from nearby first responders. However, this regional assistance is not guaranteed and may be denied by an Automatic Aid fire service provider. On the other hand, under Automatic Aid, jurisdictional lines are erased, and the closest most appropriate equipment is seamlessly centrally dispatched through the City of Phoenix. In other words, the first responders within the Automatic Aid partnership function as one regional fire department which seamlessly assist one another regardless of jurisdictional lines or names on the equipment and uniforms.

Background (continued)

More recently, the Fountain Hills Town Council has decided to form their own municipal fire department and cancel their master contract with Rural Metro by January 2024. Collectively, with Rural Metro service areas in the Northeast Valley shrinking, as well as the recent cancellation of Mutual Aid agreements Rural Metro enjoyed with nearby municipalities, Carefree has become more isolated from regional assistance in a time of need. This creates a level of unpredictability and risk associated with addressing the need for additional emergency resources during simultaneous, long duration, and/or large-scale emergency events.



Oct. 26, 2022, Workshop at The Holland Center



Nov. 10, 2022, Workshop at Carefree Council Chambers

Community Engagement:

In order to begin the public conversation on this important community-wide issue, the Town Council appointed a citizen committee to investigate the Town's emergency service options. During nearly two-dozen public meetings, the citizen appointed Public Safety Advisory Committee (PSAC), reviewed presentation materials from nearby Fire and Emergency Service agencies and attributes of the Automatic Aid regional dispatch system. The PSAC report and recommendations (**Appendix A**) were shared at a public Town Council meeting in February 2022. At this meeting, based upon the PSAC report and recommendations, the Town Council passed Resolution #2022-04 (**Appendix B**) to conduct a deeper analysis to determine the costs and analyze the Town's financial capacity to join Automatic Aid. In addition, the Council authorized that the data generated by these experts be shared with the residents through a series of open houses to inform and engage the residents regarding the evolving circumstances with the provision of Fire and Emergency Services, the options, the costs, the financial capacity to fund additional costs, and options the community may need to consider to address any funding gaps. Furthermore, this Resolution also contemplated a short-term contract with Rural Metro to bridge the possible transition to an Automatic Aid provider. This contract extension was negotiated this past spring and brought to the Council for approval in June 2022 (**Appendix C**). The first term of the contract is for 18-months and will expire in January 2024. If the community wishes to continue its relationship with Rural Metro, the second term contemplates an additional 42-month term. With this short-term Rural Metro contract in place, the Town contracted with professionals to provide expertise in Fire and Emergency Services, Public Financial Services, and Economics to further clarify the costs and capacity for the Town to absorb the additional expenses required to support a transition to Automatic Aid.

This report will summarize these findings which have been shared with the community through a video, a series of five public workshops (**Appendix D**), social media, digital newsletters (**Appendix E**), and printed media (**Appendix F**).