

DATE ISSUED: January 31, 2003 REPORT NO. 03-018
ATTENTION: Public Safety and Neighborhood Services Committee
Agenda of February 5, 2003
SUBJECT: San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program Status
Report

SUMMARY

THIS IS AN INFORMATION ITEM ONLY. NO ACTION IS REQUIRED ON THE PART OF THE COMMITTEE OR THE CITY COUNCIL.

BACKGROUND

On July 22, 2002, the City Council approved a ninety (90) day pilot San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program. Under this Program, the firefighting and rescue helicopter and crew provided multi-mission emergency services to the City and County of San Diego. During this period, fees for service were not charged to the county agencies which are signatory to the County of San Diego Fire Mutual Aid Agreement or county law enforcement agencies.

Through a Memorandum of Agreement with the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) and the County of San Diego, San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) was authorized to administer the Program. The cost of the Program was estimated at \$470,000.

The Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter went into service on August 8, 2002 and terminated operations on November 11, 2002 for a total of ninety-six (96) days. During the 96-day operational period, the helicopter and crew responded to 45 fire and rescue emergency incidents and provided training to 1,790 personnel from 25 separate public safety agencies (fire, law enforcement, lifeguard, etc.) in San Diego County.

DISCUSSION

Due to the success of the pilot program and the need for fire and rescue helicopter services in the region, San Diego's Fire-Rescue Department is continuing to pursue funding to establish a permanent, year-round (long-term) program and to engage in a seasonal (short-term) program.

Long-term Program: A year-round, 24/7 fully funded regional fire and rescue helicopter program would consist of the acquisition and build-up of two (2) Bell 212HP helicopters. Staffing would be accomplished by either hiring or contracting for pilots, mechanics, maintenance and support. Costs for a permanent program include a one-time expense of \$5 million to procure the aircraft and \$1 million to \$1.5 million in annual operating funds.

Short-term Program: A seasonal program would begin operations on or around July 1, 2003 (FY04) and operate for a minimum of four (4) months. The duration of the seasonal program will be dictated by the amount of funding available. The seasonal program is a "contract" program with turn-key helicopter operations provided by a vendor selected through the City Request for Proposal (RFP) process. The cost for a seasonal program is approximately \$800,000.

Since the completion of the ninety-day pilot program, there has been significant progress in the effort to secure funding and prepare for both the long-term and short-term programs. Specific progress has been made in the following areas:

SAFE

The Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) has recommended making up to \$400,000 of matching funds available in FY04 to the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program. The SAFE Regional Board believes that the motorist aid capabilities of the helicopter and crew are critical to San Diego County's increasing traffic congestion mitigation needs and a key component to the region's Traffic Incident Management (TIM) Program.

Helicopter Service Provider

In February, an RFP will be advertised nationally to select a vendor that will furnish the City of San Diego with an operated helicopter with support personnel for various periods of up to one (1) year with options to renew for various periods of up to four (4) additional one (1) year periods. The selected contractor will be capable of providing both short and long-term turn-key program operations.

Private Funding Effort

Scripps Health has brought community and business leaders together to assist in the funding effort of both the seasonal (short-term) program and the year-round (long-term) program. A celebrity golf tournament is planned for April, 2003 as a kick-off to a community-wide fund-raising campaign. Efforts are underway to secure the endorsement of San Diego's Regional Chamber of Commerce and other organizations to support the formation of a public-private partnership to fund the helicopter program.

Federal Assistance

Meetings have taken place with members of the San Diego Regional Congressional Delegation to discuss the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program and its application and involvement in the homeland preparedness effort. A meeting was held on December 26, 2002 with the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Duncan Hunter, to discuss homeland preparedness and federal funding opportunities. Representative Hunter has made the Regional Helicopter Program one of his highest priorities.

Cooperative Partnerships

After approximately two years of dialogue, a cooperative partnership is being developed between three (3) agencies; San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, Sycuan Fire Department and the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

The Sycuan Fire Department sponsors a BIA Hotshot Crew whose members will be assigned daily to the helicopter. The availability of this crew will be at no cost to the City and will significantly enhance firefighting and rescue service delivery on incidents throughout San Diego County.

In January, 2003, basic helicopter operations training was provided to forty (40) City of San Diego public safety personnel (fire, law enforcement, lifeguards, etc.) and forty (40) wildland firefighters from Sycuan Fire Department and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Instructors were provided by the Washington D.C. Office of the BIA. Continued joint training has been planned and scheduled.

Montgomery Field Heliport Development

The Montgomery Field Airport Master Plan includes the Fire-Rescue Department Heliport on the northwest side of the field in its public review draft. A private heliport consultant was hired to develop the concept plan and complete the federal permitting process. This process has been successfully completed.

Regional helicopter program management staff met with the Montgomery Field airport staff in January to discuss the further development of the site. Specifically, staff received authorization to complete the concept plan for review and approval by the California Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics. Federal and state grant applications were also provided by the Airport staff and will be submitted to assist in funding the development of the site.

Crew Chief Selection

After a competitive process, five (5) Fire Captains were selected to participate in the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program as Helicopter Crew Chiefs. These selected Fire Captains are receiving extensive classroom and field training that will allow for certification by the start of program operations. The City incurred no cost during the selection process.

ACTION ITEMS

The next steps for the Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program are as follows:

1. Continue to seek and secure matching funds to the \$400,000 recommended by the Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies (SAFE) for the short-term program.
2. Finalize plans for the fund-raiser with Scripps Health and develop a strategic plan for the community fund-raising campaign.
3. Continue to work closely with Congressman Duncan Hunter's Office to support his recommendation of federal funding for the Program.
4. Finalize the Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) and the Operations Plan with the Sycuan Fire Department and the U.S. Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs.
5. Complete the Montgomery Field Airport concept plan for the Fire-Rescue Department Heliport and submit permit application to the California Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics. Complete and submit federal and state grant applications.
6. Return to the Public Safety and Neighborhood Services (PS&NS) Committee in April, 2003 to provide a progress report.

FISCAL IMPACT

No fiscal impact with this action. No General Fund or other City funding is being requested for this program. All program funding will be provided by outside sources.

Respectfully submitted,

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Fire Chief

Approved: P. Lamont Ewell
Assistant City Manager

BOWMAN/BF