

Mono Vista Fire Station 56 closed Tuesday, June 30; Engine 561 out of service

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Tuesday was the final day Tuolumne County Mono Vista Fire Station 56 was staffed and responding to calls, due to a \$2.3 million cut from the county's 2026-27 agreement with Cal Fire that was approved by the county Board of Supervisors in April by a split 3-2 vote.

Firefighter Cameron Boyd and Fire Capt. Patrick Cohen agreed to pose for photos Tuesday afternoon with Engine 561, which was taken out of service later that day.

"I think that's a big hit to the community that once this engine's gone, it's going to be a very long response time for somebody to get up here and actually take care of the situation at hand," Cohen said.

With the closing of Station 56, the county just went from five engines covering 1,620 square miles of jurisdiction to four engines, which is now one engine for every 405 square miles, said Tuolumne County Fire and Cal Fire Tuolumne-calaveras Unit Assistant Chief Nathan Gorham.

Volunteer firefighters began working out of Station 56 in the 1970s. Volunteer Firefighter Doug W. Clark, a former lieutenant in charge at Station 56, who served more than 40 years as a volunteer firefighter for the county, used to drive Water Tender 569, which was parked inside Station 56 on Tuesday.

Firefighters did not spend the night at Station 56, which is sparsely furnished like many rural community fire stations. There's an office set up in the kitchen, and there were a few mementos on the walls, including a hand-drawn thank you note from Soulsbyville Elementary School transitional kindergarten students from May 2025, and an old black-and-white photo of Brush Engine 563, and several fire hose nozzles that date back to the 1980s or 1990s.

"As federal SAFER grant funding has come to an end, our department faces the difficult reality of closing TCFD Station 56, effective July 1 and placing its Engine 561 out of service," Gorham said Tuesday in a written statement.

SAFER — Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response — is administered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and provides direct funding to fire departments and volunteer firefighter organizations. Tuolumne County's SAFER grant funding began in 2022/23 and reached the end of its three year term on Tuesday, the end of fiscal year 2025-26.

"While cutting an engine is not the outcome we had hoped for, we are cognizant of the fiscal situation the County of Tuolumne currently faces," Gorham said. "TCFD is jurisdictionally responsible for 1,620 square miles of the County's 2,274 square miles. Station 56 will remain a volunteer station but currently lacks any volunteers to respond. This change will impact our ability to respond quickly and effectively to emergencies throughout our community."

The Tuolumne County Fire Department is built on being a combination fire department, which means you have paid and volunteer firefighters, Gorham said. If you go back to the 1970s, TCFD had 200 volunteers. By the turn of the century, TCFD had 100 volunteers.

"Today we have eight volunteers," Gorham said. "There's a waning decline in civic engagement and volunteerism and it's not just toward fire agencies. You see it in all sorts of volunteer organizations. But for us, we need to recognize that the volunteers, they're not coming back, and we need to adapt, because that's the time we're in."

Moving forward, Tuolumne County Fire will need to supplement its staff through larger investments from the Board of Supervisors toward TCFD, Gorham said, as well as citizen-led or community-based tax measures, specific to fire to help bring in the paid staffing.

"We're a county of 55,000 people, approximately, and we have eight volunteers," Gorham said. "That is telling that the volunteers aren't returning. So we have to bolster and supplement with other ways, in addition to paid staffing, the Tuolumne County Fire Department resident firefighter program, and in addition to that we aim to create soon, the Columbia College Fire Academy Regional Internship Program, bridging between the fire academy, the career technical education aspects of the college, and working in amongst the other fire protection agencies in Tuolumne County to create pathways of employment for those coming out of the Columbia College Fire Academy."

Until Tuesday, Station 56 was staffed with one fire captain, three fire apparatus engineers, and two firefighters.

"But I can tell you, effective tomorrow, there's nobody here," Gorham said Tuesday.

"Because while this will remain a county volunteer fire station, guess what we lack? Volunteers. We have none that operate in this area. We'll be reliant upon the response times from Station 51 as well as from our automatic aid partners through Twain Harte Fire Depart-

ment, Tuolumne Rancheria, Tuolumne City, as well as Cal Fire TCU out of Twain Harte and Standard to supplement the coverage gap that now exists.”

Five of the six firefighters who worked out of Station 56 have been reassigned to stations in Tuolumne County, and one of the engineers left Tuolumne County to go back to his home area, Tulare County, Cohen said.

Engine 561 was a full-time engine, in a part-time location, and now that Station 56 is closed and Engine 561 is out of service, residents can expect longer response times for structure fires, vehicle accidents, medical emergencies, and other incidents requiring immediate intervention, Gorham said.

The county’s remaining fire crews will be responsible for covering a larger response area, increasing the likelihood that units may already be committed to other emergencies when new calls are received.

“While our firefighters remain committed to providing the highest level of service possible, reduced staffing and apparatus availability inevitably increase risk to both the public and emergency responders,” Gorham said. “We are grateful for the TCFD line personnel who authored the SAFER Grant application and FEMA for selecting us as a recipient. We will continue exploring every opportunity to restore these critical resources and maintain the level of fire protection our community deserves.”



Firefighter Cameron Boyd (top, left) and Fire Captain Patrick Cohen pose next to Station 56's Engine 561 on Tuesday. Tuesday was the station's (above) last day operating.