

Station shutdown

Tuolumne County supervisors vote 3-2 to close Mono Vista Fire Station 56



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The Tuolumne County Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 Tuesday to cut \$2.3 million from the county's 2026-27 agreement with Cal Fire, which terminates six full-time county firefighter positions, eliminates one fire engine and its crew, and will result in the closing of Mono Vista Fire Station 56.

Cuts to firefighter staffing and the closing of Station 56 were supported Tuesday by supervisors Mike Holland, of District 1; Anaiah Kirk, of District 3; and Steve Griefer, of District 4. Supervisors Ryan Campbell, of District 2, and Jaron Brandon, of District 5, opposed the cuts. Board members voted identically to a previous vote on the same subject in January.

Before the board took up the fire funding issue as agenda item 13, Kirk said he met Monday with "Cal Fire leadership above our local leadership level" to "have a good conversation." Griefer said he was with Kirk at "the Cal Fire meeting" and it was "a great discussion."



Ridgewood's very own Charles Luke at the BOS meeting

The decision came after more than two contentious hours of critical public comment and board debate Tuesday morning.

Willow Springs resident Patty Irvin said she came to the meeting Tuesday “because I want to express my anger at this decision or that this is even on the agenda today. I’m angry because three of you are playing fast and loose with our money, with our safety, and literally with our lives. You screwed this one up and you need to fix it.”

Everyone in Tuolumne County knows they’re going to have to spend more money if fire stations close, Tuolumne County goat farmer Alec Zachreson, who also runs a fuels reduction business, told the board before they voted.

“We’re going to have to spend more on insurance,” Zachreson said. “I think myself and everyone else would rather spend our money keeping fire stations open, keeping our homes intact, rather than giving our money to predatory insurance companies. They won’t do a darn thing until our homes are in ashes.

“The first step here is to vote down this resolution so that you have an opportunity to go back and look at this again. Everyone wants you to.”



Closing Station 56 as a cost cutting measure is unnecessary and viable alternatives exist to keep Station 56 open, Mi-wuk Village resident Emily Pardee said to the board. She argued that the county has already set aside funds within the fire budget and contingency funds that could keep all fire stations open at least through 2027 without cutting services.

“By September 2025, nearly \$800,000 had been saved by our county fire department in anticipation of the end of the previous SAFER grant,” Pardee said. “However, this money was removed by the board from the fire budget and thrown back into the general fund to be spent on other things. Restoring this money to the fire fund, then using existing contingency funds to cover any shortfalls, easily allows the county to maintain full fire protection through at least 2027 and without going into reserves.”

The acronym SAFER is short for Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response. The grant funding is a temporary Federal Emergency Management Agency program that has provided monetary resources to fire departments and volunteer firefighter groups to increase or maintain staffing, hire firefighters, and meet industry response standards. It is not a permanent revenue stream.

In 2022, the county received a federal SAFER grant that provided \$9 million over the ensuing three fiscal years to fund an additional 19 firefighter positions, which boosted the number of operating fire stations from two to five.

“The right course of action is clear — prioritize public safety, by reinstating fire fund allocations, and utilize existing contingency funds as originally recommended by county leadership,” Pardee said. “This approach avoids costs, preserves emergency response capacity, and reflects the values of a community that refuses to compromise on public safety. Please stand with your neighbors, firefighters, and first responders.”

Confidence resident Tim Mccaffrey, who is running to replace Kirk as District 3 supervisor in the June 2 primary election, criticized what he heard was a Monday meeting between Kirk, Griefer, and some Cal Fire administrators.

“First off, I want to start with the private meeting with Cal Fire,” Mccaffrey said. “It just seems like it’s one more instance where you guys are just pushing the boundaries on the Brown Act. We already are skeptical of government, and transparency is important. Back door meetings that you guys are having just further the public’s distrust.”

Mccaffrey added that he is against defunding Cal Fire. He said he has spoken to hundreds of District 3 residents since he began his election campaign and believes fire is their top concern.

“Pulling \$2.3 million away from Cal Fire puts us all in danger,” Mccaffrey said. “This will raise our insurance rates. This will move us into harm’s way.”

The board spent an hour debating how to modify the existing recommendation from county staff on Cal Fire funding, making motions and confusing counter motions.

Before the board voted to cut Station 56, Griefer told the public it is the board’s responsibility to provide service and safety, not just to one fire station, but to the entire county.

“There are multiple constituents from throughout the county that said, ‘We don’t like it, but we understand that you’re doing this, so you save the other four stations,’ ” Griefer said. “Remember, several years ago, we only had two stations.”

Responding to some comments from the public that the decision to cut Station 56 was being made politically, Kirk said, “I’m not a politician, I’m a statesman.”

Shortly after the board broke for lunch and closed session, and before the board voted to close Station 56, Sonora resident Hans Bayer said he understood why it was taking so long for county leaders to make a decision on its funding with Cal Fire.

“It’s an ongoing controversy,” Bayer said. “It’s not just a local issue. It’s a California state issue that’s propagated by the government way above us, the tax base, and the cost of living, all of those things add up to what we see now, here.

“It’s not just Tuolumne County, it’s all the counties,” Bayer said. “The solution has to go beyond Tuolumne County. Unfortunately, Cal Fire has a high rate of doing business. Their wages, the union wages, all impact what we have to pay for. The cost of a fire engine is all built to full retail specs. Every one we purchase costs that full retail. There’s ways to buy used equipment, too, so that does help the budgets. But like Supervisor Kirk said, you have to spread it to all the agencies and resources and needs of the county, and you have to live within the budget.”

The board heard public comment on the matter for about two hours, from 10 a.m. until noon, then reconvened to vote after lunch and closed session, from about 2:15 p.m. to 2:25 p.m.

On Jan. 6, the board directed Cal Fire to move forward with an amendment to its agreement with the county “that would reduce six positions for fiscal year 26/27, a reduction of \$2,372,756,” county staff said in a memo dated for Tuesday that was released with public meeting materials this week.

The memo, from County Administrator Roger Root to the board, concludes with its recommendation, “Staff respectfully request the Board approve the amendment to the Fire Cooperative Agreement with Cal Fire Year 2026/27 and authorize the Board Chair to sign all related documents.”

Root placed the \$2.3 million cut in the context of a three year agreement with Cal Fire, from July 1, 2024, through June 30, 2027. If approved, the amendment reduces the total of the three-year agreement from nearly \$34.8 million to about \$32.4 million.

Mono Vista Fire Station 56 is one of the county Fire Department’s five stations. The board voted 3-2 on the county Fire Department cuts in early January, at the end of about three hours of presentation, public comment, and discussion of county fire funding, with Cal Fire Tuolumne-calaveras Unit Chief Nick Casci, who is also chief of county Fire and Groveland Community Services District Fire, and County Fire Assistant Chief Nathan Gorham.

Mono Vista Station 56, at 16925 Mono Vista Road North, runs one Type 1 county Fire Department engine company, which responds to 1,188 calls a year, Gorham said in January after the board’s vote. Gorham emphasized that all calls that Mono Vista Station 56 currently responds to will have to be shifted to other resources or agencies once the station is closed.

