

## Deborah Padovan

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**From:** Jim Scheinman >  
**Sent:** Wednesday, September 30, 2020 12:16 PM  
**To:** J Loqan; Kristine.zanardi@bos.sccgov.org; Deborah Padovan  
**Cc:** ; Karen Patou; Morgan Snyder  
**Subject:** Re: Fire department issue questions

This post from one of our neighbors seems to make a lot of sense to me .. according to his thoughtful analysis, we should keep the fire dept in LAH and not combine with the county. Do you agree?



[Neal Mielke](#) Los Altos Hills-Zone 15 • [23 hr ago](#)



**[Don't be swayed by the Fire District ad in the Town Crier.](#)** We all love firefighters, but please don't be swayed by the advertisement that their union took out in the Town Crier, condemning the Los Altos Hills Fire district and urging that it be consolidated with the rest of the county. I'm just an ordinary resident here. I have no history with the Fire Commission. But I've looked into this issue, read the audit, and attended or watched the videos of the County hearings that have discussed it. This community and its fire district are being attacked by the union and its hired PR company, and the arguments for consolidation are one-sided and misleading. Sorry for the length of this post, but if you want to understand this controversy better then please read on. The ad says that the auditor found that the fire district "mismanaged funds", and goes on to complain about a "subsidy" that the fire district gave to the water suppliers. Here's the full story. The district partnered with the two water suppliers here to bring fire hydrants and water pressure up to standards and ensure that an earthquake would not knock out the water supply to hydrants. The ad says this is why the LAHCFD needs "oversight". But the district, and this hydrant program in particular, have had oversight all along. The County Fire Chief is the LAHCFD's Fire Chief, and he attends the Fire Commission meetings where all the LAHCFD's programs are discussed and decided upon. The district's budget highlighted this program, and as required by law that budget was reviewed and approved by the County Board of Supervisors. The auditor criticized the program as possibly inconsistent with some technical provision in the rules governing the LAHCFD. The auditor asked that the County Attorney review the matter and issue an opinion, and as I understand it that has not been done yet. Meanwhile, I've been told that the attorneys that the LAHCFD had asked about the program said that it was legal. Legal fine points aside, as a resident here I do not resent my property tax dollars going towards reliable fire hydrants. The other "financial mismanagement" example in the ad is the removal of trees on private property "in low fire hazard areas." Here's the full story. Yes, the LAHCFD had a tree-removal program which removed dead and dangerous trees on both public and private property. That was a widely advertised program, well known to the Fire Chief and highlighted in the budgets that the Board of Supervisors approved. Was it a perfect program? No. The auditor has a point, that the program did not prioritize which trees to remove as well as it should have. But the ad failed to

mention that the LAHCFD came to the same conclusion before the audit was done, and it ended the program. It is now redirecting those funds to programs such as a shaded fuel break near Page Mill Road, to protect us from a fire coming in from Foothill Park. The LAHCFD should be commended, not condemned, for learning from recent wildfires and adjusting its programs. Also, the tree removal program was far from the boondoggle that it's portrayed as. I've looked into this program, though I've never used it, and I do not resent my property tax dollars being spent on it. The audit states that 94% of trees were removed from "low risk" areas, but that statistic is based on a fiction. The fiction is that about 94% of the LAHCFD territory is "low risk". This isn't the auditor's fault: the 2016 County Wildfire Preparedness Plan (CWPP) shows most of our area to be "low risk" for wildfire. But this flies in the face of reality, as anyone would know who has followed the recent fires and has eyes to look at our terrain and fuel levels. I've studied the CWPP wildfire-risk maps for the LAHCFD and for the district that we're being compared to, the South Santa Clara County Fire District (SSCCFD) near Morgan Hill and Gilroy. They are entirely inconsistent, as if different people with different standards put them together. The CWPP map for the SSCCFD assigns moderate and high wildfire risk to farmland and vineyards on flat land, served by straight, wide roads. The CWPP map for the LAHCFD assigns low risk to hills of mixed chaparral, grassland, and trees, served by narrow dead-end roads. I've also looked at Cal Fire weather stations, which measure air and fuel temperature and dryness. Our numbers are just as fire-prone as the SSCCFD's. The CWPP was scheduled for revision this year, so it's overdue. It needs to be grounded in reality. Meanwhile, the dead and dangerous trees that were removed by this program were not "low risk". Insurance companies are cancelling policies here. They are not run by fools. The ad also cites "potential legal violations of the Brown Act." I've read the audit, and indeed the audit does find some instances of "potential" (not proven) violations. The auditor went on to write that "We saw no evidence to suggest these potential violations were intentional." I'm no expert in the Brown Act, and many of you may never have heard of it. The Act apparently governs points of procedure related to public notices, what topics must be discussed in open hearings as opposed to being OK in subcommittees, and issues like that. If there were unintentional violations of those provisions, then by all means improve the training. The main purpose of an audit is to identify areas that need to be improved. But as a taxpayer I don't feel any sense of outrage over the examples given by the auditor. In all of this, I'm not defending the status quo regarding fire prevention here. I hope that we've all gotten a wake-up call, if not from the 2017 Napa/Sonoma fires then from the CZU fire just over the hill from us. We need to do better. The Town Council needs to do better. Every city and fire district in the state needs to do better. But this attack on the LAHCFD isn't part of a plan to improve fire safety here. If the consolidation goes through, it will make fire safety worse here. So, if fire safety isn't at the root of the push to "consolidate", what is? Money. I watched the video of the 9/1/20 Board of Supervisors meeting and wrote down the words of Supervisor Cortese, who is one of two supervisors pushing consolidation. Let Mr. Cortese tell you in his own words what consolidation means. He asked the Fire Chief "what prospectively consolidation can do to mitigate the general fund burden" of fire prevention across the county. He went on to answer his own question: "it's a matter of sort of the rich offsetting the poor and the moderate income part of the district, kind of holding everything together." Who are the rich? The LAHCFD. Who are the poor? The SSCCFD. It's the audit of the SSCCFD, not the LAHCFD, that mentions consolidation – as a way to move funds from our district to theirs. The Town Crier ad highlighted the districts of Palo Alto, Los Altos, and Cupertino in blue, and the LAHCFD in red, as if consolidation were a matter of combining those four districts. It is not. Consolidation would move local property taxes from our area down south by 50 miles. Fire prevention spending here would fall, to the detriment of

not only the LAHCFD area but also the adjoining communities. For those who don't feel immediately threatened by the LAHCFD consolidation proposal, don't trust that this is the only issue that could receive this kind of money-grab. If local property taxes are better transferred elsewhere for fire, why not for schools? And why is the union showing that map of the LAHCFD along with the three adjacent city fire districts, if they are not part of the consolidation proposal? I've been told that the Palo Alto union branch wants the Palo Alto city FD to get transferred to County. If the LAHCFD gets consolidated, perhaps that strengthens their argument about Palo Alto. Is Los Altos next? Cupertino?