



**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
AGENDA LETTER**

Clerk of the Board of Supervisors
105 E. Anapamu Street, Suite 407
Santa Barbara, CA 93101
(805) 568-2240

Agenda Number:

**Submitted on:
(COB Stamp)**

Department Name: Fire
Department No.: 031
Agenda Date: 4/7/2026 Set Hearing
5/5/2026 First Reading
5/12/2026 Second Reading
Placement: Set-Hearing
Departmental 5/5/2026
Administrative 5/12/2026
Estimated Time: 1 Hour on 5/5/2026
Continued Item: No
If Yes, date from: N/A
Vote Required: Majority

TO: Board of Supervisors
FROM: Department Director(s): Garrett Huff, Fire Chief/Fire Warden
Contact: Fred Tan, Fire Marshal
SUBJECT: **Set Hearing for Amending Chapter 15 of the Santa Barbara County Code with Ordinance and Fee Updates**

County Counsel Concurrence

As to form: Yes

Other Concurrence:

As to form: N/A

Auditor-Controller Concurrence

As to form: Yes

Recommended Actions

That the Board of Supervisors (Board):

- a) On April 7, 2026 set a hearing for May 5, 2026 on the Departmental Agenda consider the introduction (first reading) of an ordinance amending Chapter 15 of the Santa Barbara County Code to adopt amendments and the recommendations of the "Santa Barbara County Fire Department User Fee Study: March 2026" with the resulting fee updates as the enforcement Code in all areas within the Santa Barbara County Fire Protection District and all other unincorporated areas of the County where the Santa Barbara County Fire Department is the authority having jurisdiction (AHJ), unless otherwise specified by this ordinance;
- b) Read the title the Ordinance and waive full reading of the Ordinance; and

- c) Continue the hearing to May 12, 2026, on the Administrative Agenda to consider recommendations, as follows:
 - i. On May 12, 2026, consider the adoption (second reading) of an ordinance amending Chapter 15 of the Santa Barbara County Code as set forth above; and/or
 - ii. Direct the Santa Barbara County Fire Department to conduct a subsequent fee study after a period of twelve (12) months to propose adoption of a cost neutral policy and develop a cost neutral rate for land development, operational permit, occupancy inspection and miscellaneous inspection fees;
 - iii. Consider and approve adoption of a Resolution of Legislative Findings Supporting Amendments to the California Fire Code; and
- d) Determine that the adoption of an ordinance amending fees for Santa Barbara County Fire Department is not subject to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Sections 15273(a)(1) and 15378(b)(5).

Summary Text

This item recommends that the Board of Supervisors update the existing hourly rates and fees for the Santa Barbara County Fire Department (SBCFD) related to operational, occupancy inspection, land use and development review, other related inspection and permitting, and miscellaneous inspection fees.

SBCFD's fee schedules have not been comprehensively updated for extended periods of time. Land development, sprinkler and alarm, and construction permit fees were last comprehensively reviewed in 2006 and 2016. Occupancy inspection, operational permit, and miscellaneous inspection fees have not been updated since 2009. Since those updates, staffing costs, operating expenses, regulatory requirements, and service delivery responsibilities have increased substantially.

To support the proposed operational inspection, land development, occupancy inspection and miscellaneous inspection review fee updates, SBCFD hired a consultant to prepare a comprehensive User Fee Model. The resulting 'Santa Barbara County Fire Department User Fee Study: March 2026' (User Fee Study) provides a comprehensive cost analysis of SBCFD's permitting and inspection activities. Within the User Fee Study, a summary-level comparison of existing fee revenues to the fully burdened cost of providing services, including staffing classifications, hourly cost rates, and average time required to perform specific tasks. The User Fee Study indicates that many existing fees recover less than the reasonable cost of service and that SBCFD has fallen behind on market rates when compared to other jurisdictions.

The proposed User Fee Study updates are derived from the User Fee Model findings and are intended to improve cost recovery, enhance transparency, and better align fees with the reasonable cost of providing services, consistent with agreements with County Planning, city's served by SBCFD and State laws. The Fire Department recommends conducting a follow-up fee study after twelve (12) months of implementation to evaluate actual revenues and expenditures.

This item also involves amendments to Chapter 15 related to the adoption of the proposed fees and Appendix A, Board of Appeals.

Additionally, the Board is asked to consider adopting a cost neutrality policy for SBCFD's Fire Prevention Division. This policy would mirror Santa Barbara County Planning and Development and Orange County Fire Authority's Fire Prevention Division's cost neutral policies; and would assist with ensuring timely land use, development and building permit review. If this policy were adopted by the Board, SBCFD would enlist the current consultant to conduct the twelve (12) month follow-up and a cost neutrality study during the same time frame.

Discussion

The Santa Barbara County Fire Department provides fire prevention, plan review, inspection, and operational oversight services necessary to protect life and property and ensure compliance with the 2025 California Fire Code, the 2025 California Wildland Urban Interface Code, Chapters 10 and 15 of Santa Barbara County Code of Ordinances, SBCFD's Development Standards and other applicable State and County fire and life-safety regulations. SBCFD provides these services to the unincorporated areas of Santa Barbara County, the City of Goleta, the City of Solvang and the City of Buellton. These services include land development review, inspection of fire protection systems such as sprinklers and alarms, issuance of occupancy permits, and review of operational and miscellaneous permits.

Government Consulting Partners

SBCFD contracted with Government Consulting Partners (GCP) to evaluate current cost recovery levels and support the proposed operational permit, land development, occupancy inspection and miscellaneous inspection fee updates. For this purpose, GCP prepared a comprehensive User Fee Model. The resulting User Fee Study provides a summary-level comparison of existing fee revenues to the fully burdened cost of providing services, based on current staffing classifications, hourly cost rates, and average time required to complete specific tasks. The User Fee Study also demonstrates that many existing fees recover less than the reasonable cost of service.

The User Fee Study prepared by GCP, including time and travel analysis and actual billed time on projects, provides an accurate summary of the time spent by inspection, permitting and support staff in the delivery of inspection, permitting and Fire Code compliance services. GCP calculated hourly rates to establish actual costs to deliver services and examined data from average annual case volumes and actual intake, review and inspection data, employing averages to determine reasonable fixed fees or deposit amounts for each specific permit or service. The proposed operational permit, land development, occupancy inspection and miscellaneous inspection fee and hourly rate updates are derived from the User Fee Study findings and are intended to improve cost recovery, enhance transparency, bring fees to market rates, potentially improve services and timelines, and better align fees with the reasonable cost of providing services consistent with local agreements and State Law.

This User Fee Study presents GCP's comprehensive review of SBCFD user fees with the goal of aligning fee structures and amounts with Board priorities and fiscal policy. The County's priorities and objectives for this project include the following components:

- Restructure fees as necessary to better align with the services being provided
- Calculate the full cost of each service
- Propose appropriate fee levels for individual services based on cost analysis and other relevant factors
- Provide recommendations for cost recovery approaches and fee setting best practices, with consideration for the unique operational demands of the department

The proposed fee schedule adds new fee categories, eliminates others, and modifies certain categories to either increase user-friendliness or better reflect how services are provided by the department.

Additionally, with the proposed update to fees and the Rules and Regulations of the Santa Barbara County Fire Department's Board of Appeals, fee related amendments and amendments to Appendix A, Board of Appeals are recommended.

Study Results

The User fee fiscal impact presents the key financial results, including cost-of-service calculations, current cost recovery rates, and anticipated changes in revenue based on proposed fee updates. In cooperation with Fire Prevention staff, GCP developed cost and revenue projections for each fee-related area under study. Costs and revenues were primarily projected by extrapolating individual per-unit results for an entire year of demand activity. The findings show an overall net revenue increase of estimated \$580,000.00 on an annual basis, assuming historic demand levels, but this does not include project volume or revenue for new fees. Currently SBCFD's revenue for fee-related services is approximately \$385,000.00 with actual costs to provide these services of approximately \$970,000.00. With the adoption of the recommended fees, projected revenue for these fee-related services is approximate at \$971,000.00, with an approximate increase in revenue of \$580,000.00. The majority of these updated fee amounts and new fee categories address SBCFD's Planning and Engineering and Inspection Services sections. Volumes were not captured for the new fee categories where these sections had activities which we previously did not charge for.

The User Fee Study will summarize the fiscal impact of the findings and recommendations for each proposed fee or proposed fee increase under study. The estimated revenue will not reflect full cost recovery for fee-related services and marginally improves performance measures and review timelines. Additional analysis and coordination by GCP will be necessary should the Board of Supervisors adopt a cost-neutral policy for SBCFD that incorporates review timeline requirements.

Peer Comparison

GCP surveyed regional agencies to determine what they charge for a variety of Fire Prevention fees. Initial analysis indicates SBCFD fees are currently well below the market rate of comparable agencies with similar activities. The full study will be available for public review on the Fire Department's website and presentations to local stakeholders.

Key considerations when reviewing comparison survey results include the following:

- Service Costs Vary - Differences in staffing, operations, and overhead means fees aren't always directly comparable.
- Policy Choices Matter - Some agencies keep fees low by subsidizing them to support access or other goals.
- Different Services - Fees may reflect different levels or types of service, even if the name is the same.
- Compliance - Fees must reflect the actual costs to stay legally compliant, regardless of what others charge.

Government Consulting Partners User Fee Study Recommendations

1. GCP recommends adoption of the proposed fees.
2. SBCFD should seek a full cost recovery policy.
3. SBCFD should continue to update the fees in the off years by the regional CPI factor (Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers (CPI-U) for Los Angeles - Long Beach-Anaheim) and/or employment cost index (ECI) factor, whichever is greater.
4. SBCFD should update fees on July 1 of each year based on the previous calendar year's index.
5. Due to the extent of the restructuring of the division's fees, GCP recommends monitoring both the time spent and revenue generated and performing a check at both six months and one year to ensure that the restructured fees are performing the way they are intended to.
6. GCP recommends that the division undertake a detailed analysis at least every three to five years, with minor adjustments in the non-study years to keep pace with economic factors.

The Santa Barbara County Fire Department has conducted initial public outreach for the proposed fee updates. Additional public noticing and meetings with local stakeholders and industry representatives will be held to present the proposed changes and address concerns.

Background

SBCFD collects fees to help offset the costs of providing essential services like fire prevention, safety inspections, reviewing building plans, issuing permits, and reducing fire risks. These fees are set by State law and County policy and apply to the unincorporated areas of Santa Barbara County, as well as the Cities of Goleta, Solvang, and Buellton.

Current revenue does not fully cover the cost of providing these services with our current staff. This shortfall makes it challenging to increase staffing, to provide services efficiently, and to meet the expectations and timelines set for Fire Prevention and development review staff. To address these challenges, SBCFD hired GCP to develop a User Fee Model to evaluate the cost of providing fee-supported services. The resulting User Fee Study consolidates service volumes, fully burdened hourly costs, average processing times, existing fee levels, and resulting cost recovery outcomes across major service categories. This summary-level analysis demonstrates that many existing fees do not recover the reasonable cost of service.

The proposed fee adjustment ensures our revenue matches the actual cost of providing these services with the staff we have. This change will strengthen SBCFD's financial footing and help us continue our work, but it will not solve all our review timeline challenges. In the interim, SBCFD has brought in 3 temporary employees, and a plan check service to assist with planning and building permit fee related services. These temporary actions were made late in 2025 and are beginning to positively address SBCFD's Planning and Engineering section's backlog. We still face staff shortages to meet our current and growing service demands. With Board approval of the recommended action to assess a cost neutral policy, SBCFD will engage GCP to conduct a study to review the impact of the revised fees on SBCFD timelines and provide recommendations in terms of staffing to address service delivery.

Additional amendments related to the recommended adoption of fees; as well as Appendix A, Board of Appeals are proposed. Revisions to Rules and Regulations for the Board of Appeals are required to streamline the appeal process and address new codes and ordinances.

Fiscal and Facilities Impacts

If adopted on May 12, 2026, the proposed ordinance and fees would become effective 60 days thereafter. The updated fee schedules are intended to improve cost recovery for Fire Department services supported by user fees for services directly attributable to land development review, occupancy inspections, miscellaneous inspection and operational permits.

Revenue from the adoption of the proposed User Fee Study is estimated to be \$970,000.00 annually, an increase of approximately \$585,000.00. This increase does not fully recover SBCFD's costs to provide services for Fire Code related public and private activities and land development.

There are no immediate facility impacts associated with adoption of the proposed fee updates.

The Fire Department will monitor actual revenues and expenditures following implementation and return to the Board after twelve (12) months with a subsequent fee study to evaluate whether the adopted fees achieve cost neutrality.

Special Instructions

The Clerk of the Board shall notice the proposed ordinance in a newspaper of general circulation in the County of Santa Barbara by publishing a summary of the ordinance at least five days prior to the first reading and again within 15 days after adoption, including the names of those supervisors voting for and against the ordinance.

Attachments

Attachment A – Public Notice

Contact Information

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