

An ad hoc committee that is looking at alternative ways to provide public safety services in Canyon Lake is only five months old.

But the nine members of the City of Canyon Lake Public Safety Advisory Committee have already invested hundreds of hours into reviewing and researching the city's existing contracts for its fire and police service, as well as looking at how other cities have handled balancing budgetary constraints for public safety in this depressed economy.

The committee recommended that Canyon Lake voters approve Measure E public safety tax on the June 7 ballot as a "stop gap" measure even as it looks at other alternatives, including regionalization and consolidation of fire and police services, and a proposal for a hybrid fire department that would consist of paid personnel and volunteers.

"Without the passage of Measure E, the city faces a crisis," said Larry Greene, retired Orange County Assistant Chief and chair of Canyon Lake's ad hoc committee. He said the committee is a "well balanced" group that includes fire and police veterans, a retired judge, manager, a former owner of a Fortune 500 firm and a financial expert. This group with over 200 years of public safety experience alone is collecting numbers based on countless in-person and phone interviews with experts in the field. The group visited similar size fire departments in Sierra Madre and La Habra Heights to collect actual cost of services, budgets and other operational data for comparison purposes. Recently two teams from the group visited the Cities of Murrieta, Hemet and Corona to determine ask for bids on communication and dispatch services should the City chose to form their own fire department.

"We are in the process of validation, not making assumptions," said Greene.

The committee is also evaluating a proposal submitted by retired firefighter Patrick Colleary who recommends that the city start its own fire department using full-time and volunteer firefighters.

Committee members said they needed more time to study the feasibility of a city fire department and if it could be operated less expensively than what currently is offered by Cal Fire/Riverside County Fire.

While numbers may change, the committee's goal is to maintain current levels of fire/paramedic service and response times – whether it's provided by Cal Fire/Riverside County, a City fire department or by some other option.

One of the misconceptions encountered by the group is that fire stations serving Canyon Lake operate independently of each other.

Station 60 in Canyon Lake is supported by Station 94 in Lake Elsinore and Station 5 in Menifee through a cooperative response agreement that is keeping fire and medical emergency response times to less than 5 minutes. Even though Station 60 handles about half the calls in Canyon Lake, it could not meet the 5-minute response goal without help from surrounding communities.

The committee, which has been meeting monthly since it was created by the Canyon Lake City Council in January, will make its recommendations to the council later this year.