



THE CITY OF SAN DIEGO

OFFICE OF THE INDEPENDENT BUDGET ANALYST REPORT

Date Issued: October 8, 2026

IBA Report Number: 26-23

PS Committee Date: October 14, 2026

Item Number: TBD

Proposed Response to Grand Jury Report

“Playing with Fire: The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion”

On June 12, 2026, the San Diego County Grand Jury filed a report titled “Playing with Fire: The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion”. The report focuses on issues pertaining to fire safety building inspections conducted by the San Diego Fire Rescue Department’s Community Risk Reduction Division.

The Report includes nine findings and nine recommendations, of which **three recommendations (Recommendations 1, 2 and 6) are directed at the City Council and Mayor. Additionally, the Fire-Recuse Department was invited, but not required, to respond to Recommendation 1 through 8, and the City Treasurer was invited, but not required, to respond to Recommendation 6.** The proposed joint response from the Mayor and Council is provided as Attachment 1, and was prepared with input from various departments, including the Fire-Rescue Department, the City Treasurer, City Attorney’s Office, and the Mayor’s Office. The Grand Jury report is included as Attachment 2 to this report.

Per the Grand Jury report, the Mayor and Council are required to provide comments to the Presiding Judge of the San Diego Superior Court on the applicable findings and recommendations within 90 days. However, the Mayor and Council President’s Office requested and received an extension for the response to December 9, 2026.

In responding to each Grand Jury finding, the City is required to either (1) agree with the finding or (2) disagree wholly or partially with the finding. Responses to Grand Jury recommendations must indicate that the recommendation (1) has been implemented; (2) has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future; (3) requires further analysis; or (4) will not be implemented because it is not warranted or is not reasonable. Explanations for responses are requested when applicable.

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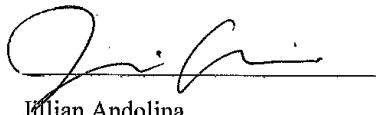
We request that the Public Safety Committee provide feedback and forward the proposed response to the full City Council for review and approval. Although this is a joint Mayoral-Council proposed response, the Council may choose to amend or change this response. If the final response that the Council approves is agreeable to the Mayor, then the joint response will be sent to the Presiding Judge. Otherwise, the Council and Mayor may send separate responses.



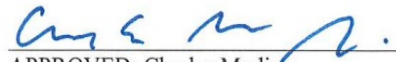
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Attachments:

1. Proposed City Response to San Diego County Grand Jury Report titled "Playing with Fire: The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion"
2. San Diego County Grand Jury Report titled "Playing with Fire: The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion"

**City of San Diego Response to
San Diego County Grand Jury Report Titled
“Playing with Fire: The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion”**

Pursuant to California Penal Code Section 933(c), the City of San Diego provides the following response to findings 1-9. Responses to recommendations 1, 2, and 6 are joint responses from the City Council and Mayor. The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) was invited, but not required, to respond to recommendations 1-8; as a result, SDFD joins the Mayor and Council on the responses to recommendations 1, 2 and 6, and has chosen to also respond to recommendations 3, 7, and 8.

RESPONSE TO FINDINGS:

Finding 1: *Because SDFD is not completing all the state-mandated fire inspections, there is an increased risk of loss of life and property in the event of a fire.*

Response: The City disagrees with the Grand Jury’s finding.

Although the City agrees that completing all the state-mandated inspections is an achievable goal, completing all inspections does not, by itself, decrease the risk of loss of life and property. The *quality* of inspections is a critical consideration when working to reduce the risk of loss of life or property in the event of a fire.

Finding 2: *Releasing inspection compliance at the conclusion of the budget cycle creates a delay in addressing CRR’s staffing and funding needs.*

Response: The City disagrees with the Grand Jury’s finding.

The Community Risk Reduction (CRR) Division establishes its baseline inventory of state-mandated inspections at the beginning of each fiscal year on July 1 and measures inspection activity against the inventory through June 30. Maintaining a defined annual reporting period allows the Department to consistently measure quarterly and annual performance and reconcile changes in the inventory of inspectable occupancies from one fiscal year to the next.

The City disagrees that finalizing annual inspection compliance at the conclusion of the fiscal year creates a delay in CRR’s staffing and funding needs. CRR does not wait until the annual compliance rate is finalized to evaluate its workload or inspection performance. Inspection activity and performance are monitored throughout the fiscal year. This allows Fire-Rescue to identify operational and resource needs during the City’s budget development process.

Finding 3: *The lack of published, accurate, and timely data reduces public awareness and support for SDFD.*

Response: The City agrees with the Grand Jury’s finding.

The City agrees that it is important to share this data. As is discussed in more detail in the response to Recommendation 2, the data needed to monitor and track state-

mandated compliance is displayed in the Fire-Rescue Department's Key Performance Indicators in the City's budget each year. This information was also included in the staffing needs analysis provided to the City Council in October 2026.

Finding 4: *Civilian inspectors could be a viable, lower-cost solution to the limited inspector staffing in CRR.*

Response: The City agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.

The Department already uses a hybrid staffing model that includes both civilian and sworn inspectors. Civilian and sworn inspectors offer a wide variety of education, training, and experience that support the City's broad range of CRR projects and services.

Finding 5: *Due to bureaucratic obstacles and budgets limitations, annually there are not enough hired recruits to fully staff SDFD stations, let alone to transition firefighters into CRR inspector roles.*

Response: The City disagrees with the Grand Jury's finding.

Staffing is impacted by multiple factors, not just the recruitment of fire recruits. The City recognizes the importance of maintaining sufficient recruitment and staffing to meet both emergency and CRR responsibilities, but it does not prevent firefighters from transitioning into CRR inspector roles.

Finding 6: *The inspection inventory database would be more accurate with increased coordination with other City and County departments.*

Response: The City disagrees with the Grand Jury's finding.

The City disagrees with this finding because CRR already coordinates with other City and County departments and utilizes multiple external data sources to identify, validate, and maintain properties within its inspection inventory.

CRR currently utilizes San Diego County Assessor property information and City Treasurer Business Tax (Business Tax) data as part of its inventory management processes. County residential property information has been used since the implementation of SB 1205 to assist in identifying potential residential occupancies subject to state-mandated inspection requirements.

CRR also receives weekly Business Tax data from the City Treasurer for review and reconciliation against the existing inspection inventory. These records require administrative review and validation before properties are added to the inspection database because not every Business Tax record represents a new inspectable occupancy. Records must be evaluated to determine whether they represent a new occupancy, an existing property, a duplicate record, or a business that is not subject to Fire-Rescue inspection requirements.

Fire-Rescue also utilizes a parcel REST service to maintain current parcel information and coordinates with the City's Development Services Department to identify new buildings and changes in occupancy through the Certificate of Occupancy process. CRR

participates in the inspection process prior to issuance of a Certificate of Occupancy, and qualifying properties can then be incorporated into the appropriate recurring inspection inventory.

Finding 7: *Use of overtime and revised scheduling procedures would improve CRR's inspection completion and compliance rates.*

Response: The City agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.

As noted in more detail in the response to Recommendation 7, Fire-Rescue currently uses voluntary overtime as a method to increase inspection capacity, and is considering the administrative, supervisory, and fiscal resources required to support the additional inspection activity.

Finding 8: *It is neither efficient nor cost effective to have sworn firefighters performing logistical scheduling and billing legwork.*

Response: The City agrees with the Grand Jury's finding.

The Department is submitting a multi-fiscal year staffing plan to the City Council, which is the administering authority as defined by California Health and Safety Code section 13146.4, that outlines the Department's additional administrative and fiscal support needs, which will be evaluated through the annual budget process.

Finding 9: *Uncompleted school inspections endanger students and staff in the event of an emergency.*

Response: The City disagrees in part with the Grand Jury's finding.

The City agrees that school inspections are an important component of protecting students and staff. However, an incomplete inspection does not, by itself, establish that a school is unsafe or that students and staff are endangered.

There are factors beyond the control of local agencies that can affect the number of inspections completed, and as noted in the City's response to Finding 1, the quality of inspections, not just the quantity, should be considered.

In addition to annual fire department school inspections, schools also receive annual facility inspections. Schools are also required to schedule the inspection, test and maintenance inspections for their fire protection systems.

RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS:

Recommendation 1: *SDFD and City Council – Set a realistic timeline for reaching 100 percent SB 1205 inspection compliance.*

Response: The recommendation has not yet been implemented, but will be implemented in the future.

To support the FY 2028 budget development process, a preliminary staffing analysis was completed in September 2026, and the full staffing needs analysis was provided to

Council in October 2026. The analysis was provided to the City Council in a memorandum format, and is based on the National Fire Protection Association 1730 Standard on Organizing and Deployment of Fire Prevention Inspection & Code Enforcement, Plan Review, Investigation and Public Education. The Department will now develop a realistic timeline for reaching 100 percent inspection compliance, which can be considered as part of the annual budget process.

Recommendation 2: *SDFD – Publish an annual report detailing services provided in the prior year, to include SB 1205 compliance broken down by occupancy category. Submit the annual report to City Council with enough lead time to adjust CRR staffing and budget prior to final budget adoption.*

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

An internal report is provided quarterly and annually to the Fiscal Services Deputy Director for San Diego Fire-Rescue Department, and provides the data needed to monitor and track state-mandated compliance data displayed as Key Performance Indicators in the City's approved budget. This information was also included in the staffing needs analysis provided to the City Council in October 2026.

Recommendation 3: *SDFD – Identify and evaluate strategies, including considering a review of the current Memorandum of Understanding with I.A.F.F. Local 145, to create a pathway for civilian inspectors to join CRR.*

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

The Department has evaluated these strategies and implemented several new emerging technologies, flexible work schedules and more efficient geographical inspection assignments. The pathway for civilians has been a topic of ongoing discussion. In FY 2026, the Fire-Rescue Department was approved for a budgeted position and is currently recruiting to hire an Associate Engineer-Fire Protection (civilian) to assist with complex fire plan reviews.

Recommendation 6: *CRR – Integrate the County Assessor's and City Treasurer's data into the inspection inventory database.*

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

As noted in the City's response to Finding 6, the City already uses data from the County Assessor and City Treasurer to identify, validate, and maintain properties within its inspection inventory database.

Recommendation 7: *CRR – Utilize voluntary overtime—and a combination of appointments and unannounced visits—to boost inspection completion rates, particularly for residential occupancies.*

Response: The recommendation has been implemented.

Fire-Rescue agrees that overtime can provide additional inspection capacity beyond regular staffing hours and has utilized voluntary overtime to supplement state-mandated inspection activity when operationally and fiscally appropriate. CRR also utilizes both scheduled appointments and unannounced inspections based on the type

of occupancy, available property and responsible-party information, inspection history, access considerations, and other operational factors.

Voluntary overtime provides CRR with an additional tool to increase inspection capacity and can increase the number of inspections completed. However, increasing field inspection activity also creates corresponding administrative, supervisory, and fiscal workload that must be considered when determining the appropriate use and scale of overtime.

Each additional inspection can generate record updates, customer communication, reinspection scheduling, case follow-up, enforcement documentation, and document processing. Supervisors must coordinate assignments, address technical and enforcement issues, review significant cases, monitor performance, and oversee overtime activity. Increased inspection activity can also generate additional billing and cost-recovery workload, including invoice generation, review, payment reconciliation, corrections, and coordination with City financial systems.

Fire-Rescue will continue to use voluntary overtime as one method to increase inspection capacity, while considering the administrative, supervisory, and fiscal resources required to support the additional inspection activity.

Recommendation 8: *CRR – Hire more civilian administrative positions to assist fire inspectors with the administrative workload.*

Response: The recommendation requires further analysis.

Fire-Rescue agrees that administrative and logistical functions should be performed by appropriate support staff when feasible so sworn fire prevention personnel can focus on inspections, enforcement, technical review, and other functions requiring specialized fire prevention knowledge and authority. However, increasing staffing levels is ultimately a budgetary decision that must be made by the Mayor and City Council. The City's existing revenues and its ongoing structural budget deficit mean that the addition of staff would require offsetting cuts elsewhere, so the benefits of additional civilian administration positions will have to be weighed against the impacts of those offsetting cuts.

As mentioned in response to Recommendation 1, a preliminary staffing analysis was provided in October 2026 for consideration during development of the FY 2028 Proposed Budget.

PLAYING WITH FIRE

THE HIGH STAKES OF LOW INSPECTION COMPLETION

A 2025-26 San Diego County Civil Grand Jury Report

PLAYING WITH FIRE

The High Stakes of Low Inspection Completion

SUMMARY

In December 2016, a warehouse fire in Oakland, CA, killed thirty-six people and left one person with non-fatal, lifelong injuries.¹ Located in an industrial zone, the ‘Ghost Ship’ building had been unlawfully converted into an artist live-work space and hosted a concert with up to one hundred attendees on the night of the fire.² The City of Oakland had previously received dozens of complaints about the property, and it was a known fire hazard.³ The Oakland Fire Chief revealed the department hadn’t inspected the warehouse since at least 2004.⁴ In July 2020 the City of Oakland paid \$32.7 million to the victims’ families.⁵ A month later Pacific Gas & Electric settled a civil lawsuit with the victims for an undisclosed amount.⁶

In response to this tragedy, the California legislature passed Senate Bill 1205 in September 2018 and amended the California Health and Safety Code §§ 13146.2, 13146.3, and 17921(b) to require fire departments to conduct annual fire safety inspections and to report compliance to an administering authority, such as a city council.⁷

SB 1205 inspectable properties include all public and private schools, hotels, motels, and multifamily dwellings with three or more units. The law allows fire agencies to collect fees to recover the cost of performing these inspections. Prior to SB 1205, California did not require fire agencies to report their annual inspection compliance.

California Health and Safety Code, §17921(b) Describes the responsibility of the local fire agency to inspect “all hotels, motels, lodging houses, apartment houses, and dwellings, and buildings and structures accessory thereto.”
California Health and Safety Code, §13146.2 & §13146.3 • HSC §13146.2 (Apartments, Hotels, and Motels), • HSC §13146.3 (Public and Private Schools) • Both mandate that these structures must be inspected annually
California Health & Safety Code Section § 13146.4 • Senate Bill No. 1205 – Is an act to add Section 13146.4 to the Health and Safety Code, relating to fire protection • Every city or county fire department, city and county fire department, or district required to perform an annual inspection pursuant to Sections 13146.2 and 13146.3 shall report annually to its administering authority on its compliance with Sections 13146.2 and 13146.3 • Requires the District to accept a report of compliance via resolution or other similar method.

Figure 1: SB 1205 regulations

The San Diego Union-Tribune reported in May 2025 that “thousands of San Diego apartment or condo buildings and schools are overdue for an annual fire safety inspection as required by state law.”⁸ The article continued, “there are roughly another 880 [properties] for which Fire-Rescue has no inspection date on record—meaning the department doesn’t know if or when it last inspected the property.”

The Grand Jury examined San Diego Fire-Rescue Department’s (SDFD) Community Risk Reduction Division (CRR) to assess its inspection performance and identify any barriers that may exist to reaching a 100 percent inspection rate in the City of San Diego (City).

We present the following recommendations to improve fire prevention practices in the City:

- SDFD and City Council – Set a realistic timeline for reaching 100 percent SB 1205 inspection compliance.
- SDFD – Publish an annual report detailing services provided in the prior year, to include SB 1205 compliance broken down by occupancy category. Submit the

annual report to City Council with enough lead time to adjust CRR staffing and budget prior to final budget adoption.

- SDFD – Identify and evaluate strategies, including considering a review of the current Memorandum of Understanding with I.A.F.F. Local 145, to create a pathway for civilian inspectors to join CRR.
- SDFD – Increase the number of academy students each year to maintain staffing levels.
- SDFD – Review the practice of not hiring outside applicants for a “lateral transfer”.
- CRR – Integrate the County Assessor’s and City Treasurer’s data into the inspection inventory database.
- CRR – Utilize voluntary overtime—and a combination of appointments and unannounced visits—to boost inspection completion rates, particularly for residential occupancies.
- CRR – Hire more civilian administrative positions to assist fire inspectors with the administrative workload.
- San Diego Unified School District, and other districts serving the City – Review fire safety inspection reports for their schools annually, at a minimum, by January 30, 2027.

BACKGROUND

Office of the City Auditor 2010 Report

In 2010 the City of San Diego Office of the City Auditor published a report titled “Performance Audit of the Fire Prevention Activities Within the City of San Diego: Significant Opportunities for Improvements Exist to Mitigate the Risk of Loss of Life and Property Resulting from Fire.” The report’s opening line states, “The Fire Prevention Bureau (Bureau) does not conduct regularly required inspections which increases the risk of loss of life and property in the event of a fire.”⁹ Apart from the division’s 2014 name change to Community Risk Reduction (CRR), there has been little change to the department’s fire prevention results.

The audit listed twenty-two recommendations to San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD), and the department agreed or partially agreed with twenty-one of them. The Grand Jury highlights four of the 2010 audit's recommendations that are relevant to complying with the current SB 1205 regulations:

- Recommendation 4: "The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department should ensure that the Fire Prevention Bureau maintains adequate documentation and data systems which provide reliable and accurate information on the universe of inspections, inspections performed, cancelled, and overdue."
- Recommendation 5: "The Fire Prevention Bureau should increase the time inspectors spend on direct inspection activity to match established department goals."
- Recommendation 7: "The San Diego Fire-Rescue Department should assess current staffing requirements for providing inspection services that are fully cost recoverable, and as part of the assessment consider the use of alternatives services to supplement and/or enhance inspection activity."
- Recommendation 8: "The Fire Prevention Bureau should work with other City departments, such as the City Treasurer's Business Tax Office and the Development Services Department, to electronically interface the Fire Prevention Bureau's database with other relevant City systems to ensure the timely capture of new business information."

A decade and a half later, the Grand Jury found that SDFD has not fully implemented these 2010 recommendations. In fact, the Grand Jury discovered that several current long-term SDFD personnel were unfamiliar with the 2010 audit. According to the Grand Jury's assessment, this disconnect has contributed to the lackluster performance in state-mandated inspection completion today.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed personnel within SDFD and fire professionals from other California agencies. SDFD provided aggregate SB 1205 inspection compliance data for

Fiscal Years 2022 through 2025. SDFD also provided aggregate data for inspectable properties with no prior inspection record on file with the department. The Grand Jury studied publicly available inspection compliance reports from other fire agencies in the state. Lastly, the Grand Jury reviewed the following documents, reports and websites:

- California Senate Bill 1205 (2018)
- Performance Audit of the Fire Prevention Activities Within the City of San Diego (2010)
- San Diego Fire-Rescue Adopted Budget FY 2024, 2025 and 2026
- Memorandum of Understanding Between City of San Diego and San Diego City Fire Fighters IAFF Local 145
- www.SanDiego.gov/fire
- San Diego County Operational Area Emergency Operations Plan (2022)

DISCUSSION

Concerned citizens and City employees alike want to prevent a tragedy like the ‘Ghost Ship’ fire from happening in our backyard. Historically, San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) has reported its inspection data in the annual adopted budget as a single line item in the Key Performance Indicator section. SDFD describes its fire inspection program as the “backbone of fire prevention in the City.”¹⁰ Despite this characterization, the department’s July 2025 adopted budget stated that SDFD completed only 50 percent of state-mandated annual fire inspections in fiscal 2025, which was a downgrade from the 68 percent completion rate reported in July 2024..¹¹

HISTORICAL INSPECTION DATA

SB 1205: K-12 Schools

San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) must inspect all K-12 public, private and charter schools within the City’s boundaries each year. The City has nearly 300 public

schools,¹² with SDFD reporting the total number of inspectable schools as being between 415 and 435.

Fiscal Year	Schools Inspected	Total Schools	Completion Rate
2022	179	425	42%
2023	263	420	63%
2024	255	435	59%
2025	310	415	75%

Figure 2: SB 1205, K-12 Schools

While the San Diego Unified School District serves most of the City, some neighborhoods are part of other districts, including Chula Vista Elementary, Del Mar Union, La Mesa-Spring Valley, Poway Unified, San Diego County Office of Education, San Dieguito Union, San Ysidro, Solana Beach, South Bay Union, and Sweetwater Union.¹³ In FY2022, SDFD inspected 42 percent of schools, increasing to 75 percent by FY2025.

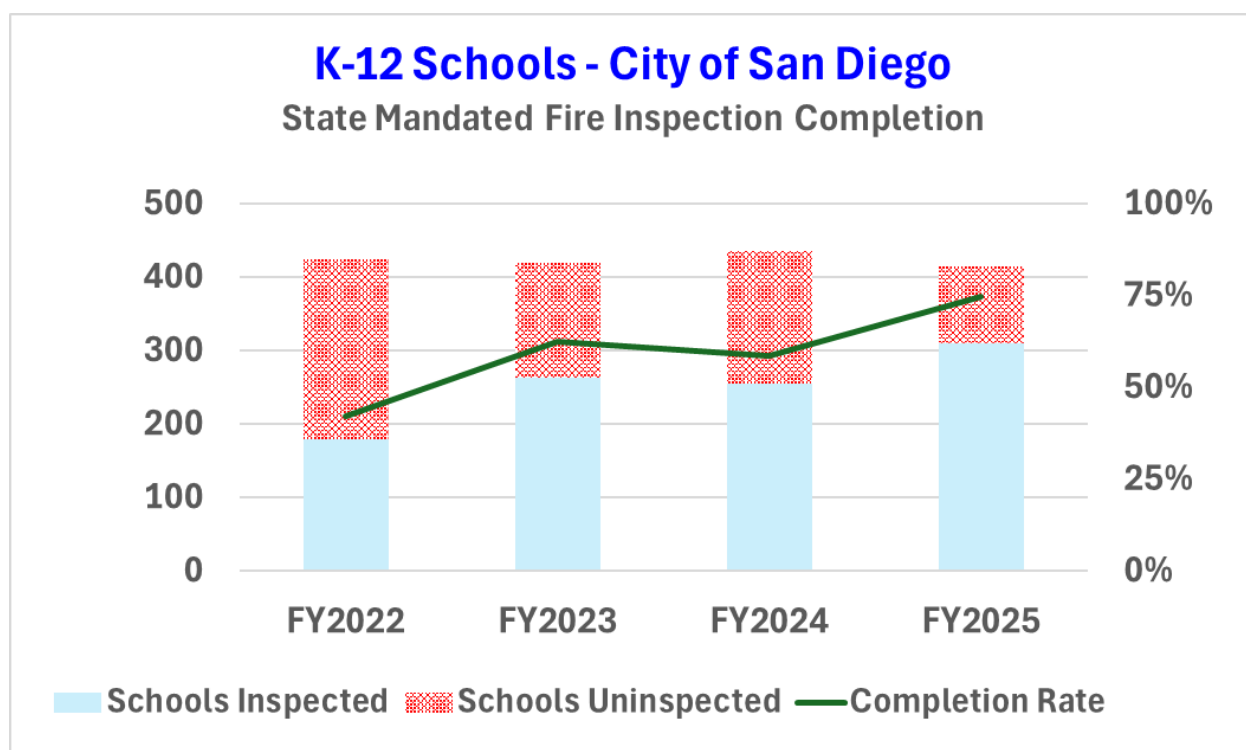


Figure 3: School inspection completion rates

Not performing fire safety inspections at schools can lead to endangering students and staff in the event of an emergency. School districts serving the City must track their annual fire safety inspections to mitigate risk on their campuses.

SB 1205: Hotels, Motels, and Multifamily Dwellings

SB 1205 requires yearly inspections of all hotels, motels, and residential buildings with three or more units, such as apartments and condominiums.

In 2024 alone, the City approved 6,166 “multiple homes” (the City defines as two or more units) building permits.¹⁴ With each new multiple homes building permit, an initial inspection is conducted to issue an occupancy certificate, and those properties with three or more units are added to the annual inspection database. Steady growth and construction mean the database of inspectable properties is in constant flux. Accurate and timely data would allow Community Risk Reduction (CRR) to better assuage these fluctuations from fiscal year to fiscal year.

Fiscal Year	Properties Inspected	Total Properties	Completion Rate
2022	3315	9304	36%
2023	4649	7622	61%
2024	3274	9506	34%
2025	3909	8241	47%

Figure 4: SB 1205, Hotels, motels, multifamily

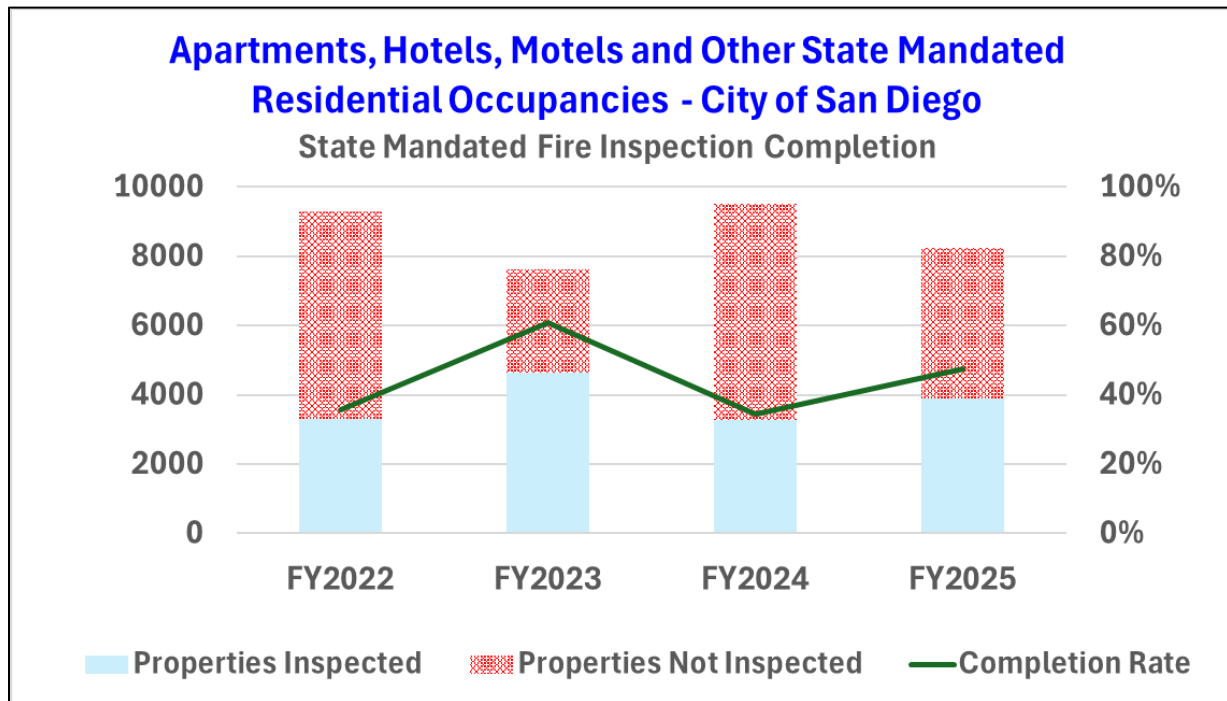


Figure 5: Hotels, motels, multifamily completion rate

SB 1205: Total Inspections

The following graph displays SDFD's SB 1205 inspection compliance for all occupancy categories combined since FY 2022.

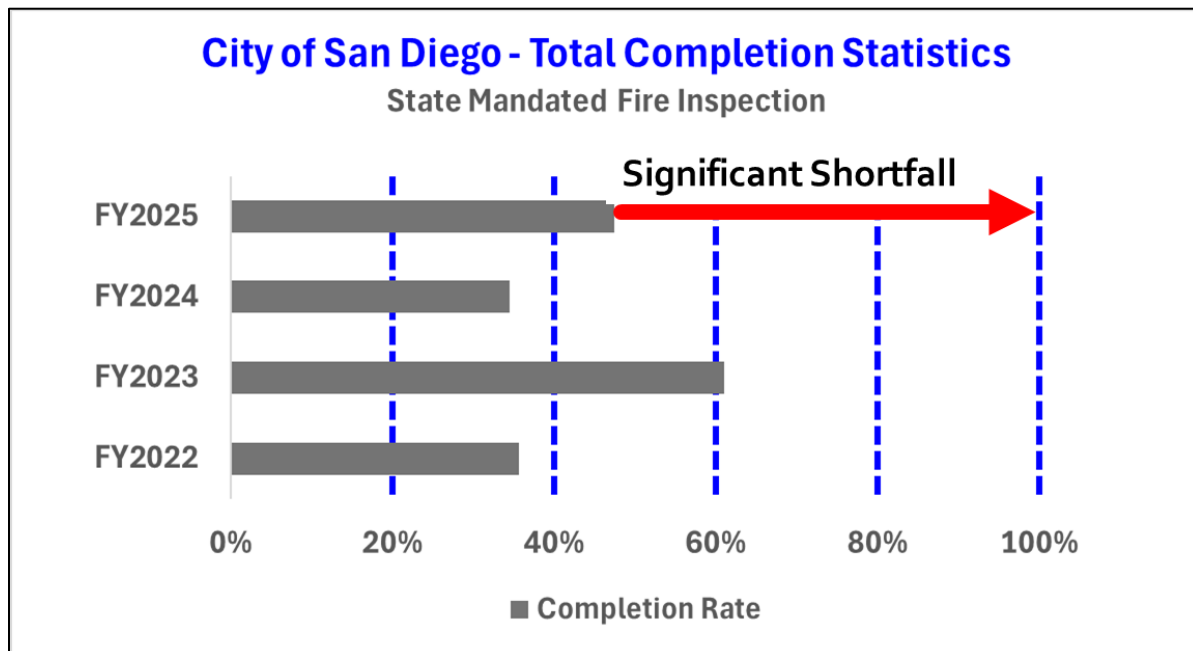


Figure 6: SB 1205, total completion rate

Grand Jury analysis revealed four obstacles to CRR achieving 100 percent inspection compliance: budget, staffing, inventory database, and interdepartmental collaboration.

Obstacle 1: Budget

The SDFD FY2026 adopted budget lists seventy CRR personnel out of 1,400 overall department personnel.¹⁵ The CRR personnel budget is just shy of 5 percent of the department's overall personnel budget – \$18,000,000 versus \$378,000,000.¹⁶

The Grand Jury acknowledges the department's prioritization toward emergency operations; active fire suppression takes precedence over an annual inspection. Fire prevention, however, is proactive risk mitigation. Annual fire safety inspections seek to identify and mitigate hazards in our community. The City and SDFD must weigh a limited budget against the level of risk they deem 'acceptable'.

Cost Recovery Model

The Grand Jury learned that SDFD developed its inspection fee schedule to fully recover the cost to perform various inspections. Last updated in July 2025,¹⁷ the following are the fees for SB 1205 inspections:

Occupancy Type	Fee - Per Inspection
Pre-school	\$448
Elementary/Middle School	\$748
High School	\$1,047
Residential 3-15 units	\$330
Residential 16-25 units	\$463
Residential 26-50 units	\$529
Residential 51-100 units	\$661
Residential 101-150 units	\$744
Residential 151-200 units	\$827
Residential - Every additional 50 units	\$165
High Rise (Apt, Condo, Hotel)	\$17 per 1,000 sq. ft.

Figure 6: SDFD inspection fee schedule

The investigation further revealed, however, that the fee schedule does not fully recover the cost associated with multiple levels of CRR supervisors and management. To balance budget outflows, fire inspectors would need to be more efficient at completing inspections and re-inspections per hour worked.

Obstacle 2: Staffing

In 2019, the San Diego Union-Tribune reported that SDFD “has a chronic understaffing problem.”¹⁸ The Grand Jury learned that this systemic issue persists; personnel from across the department raised concerns about understaffing which obligates engine and truck companies to incur mandatory overtime, with no end in sight.

Since 2009, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between SDFD and the San Diego City Fire Fighters IAFF Local 145 (Union) has stated that no civilian inspectors will be hired into CRR.¹⁹ The contract language reduces the potential inspector hiring pool to only firefighters within SDFD. Various SDFD management officials expressed

interest in revising the MOU language to relieve staffing pressure on CRR. The Union did not respond to multiple requests to participate in the Grand Jury's investigation.

The Grand Jury discovered that there are few administrative support staffers to assist fire inspectors in CRR. The result is that fire inspectors inevitably spend most of their working hours tracking down property owner contact information, scheduling inspection and re-inspection appointments, and organizing their driving route each day.

Transferring the logistical workload from inspectors to admin staffers would increase productivity and allow CRR to recover more fees per day. Non-sworn administrative personnel are easier to hire since they do not need to graduate from the fire academy. The non-sworn staff also has lower salary and pension costs than their sworn counterparts.

The Grand Jury learned that other fire agencies primarily make unannounced visits to inspect properties. CRR's highly scheduled practices reduce the total number of completed inspections each workday. The investigation revealed that, under these circumstances, a typical SDFD fire inspector spends more time on administrative tasks than on conducting inspections.

Fire Academy and Lateral Transfers

To be hired into the entry-level position in the City's fire fighter series, Fire Fighter 1, an applicant must have successfully completed San Diego Fire-Rescue's Basic Fire Academy.²⁰ The SDFD academy typically has three graduating classes per year. The Grand Jury learned through interviews that, due to a limited budget, there will only be two graduating classes in FY 2026. It costs approximately \$60,000 to recruit and graduate an entry-level firefighter from the SDFD academy. SDFD does not have enough new recruits to backfill its fire stations nor to increase the number of fire inspectors in CRR.

The SDFD website does not mention "lateral transfers"—a process to hire experienced firefighters that have graduated from a different fire academy and have obtained requisite certifications. Other than the requirements listed in the job class specifications, the Grand Jury could not find a specific City policy nor MOU contract language that

prohibits SDFD from hiring lateral transfers. In a 2021 recruitment post about accepting lateral transfers, the official SDFD Facebook page stated “No... Everyone must be successful in all aspects of our academy. Prior experience is great for some of the concepts, but we have a way that we do things in our city. That way needs to be mastered.”²¹

In recent years other fire agencies in San Diego County solicited lateral transfers to join their ranks: Coronado,²² Oceanside,²³ and Vista.²⁴ The Orange County Fire Authority periodically solicits lateral transfers and, in the past, has offered shortened academy classes for experienced firefighter-paramedics transferring from other agencies.²⁵

SDFD is unnecessarily limiting itself to hiring graduates from its own academy. The department could open its doors to lateral transfers or at least offer an expedited hiring process and training academy for experienced firefighters.

Civilian Fire Inspectors

SDFD could open a hiring bid for prospective inspectors that already possess professional certificates from the State Fire Marshal.²⁶ Hiring civilian inspectors would be an even greater cost savings than lateral transfers of sworn personnel. In the event the subject parties amend the MOU to allow CRR to hire civilian inspectors, SDFD would avoid the cost of paying for academy slots and certifications for probationary firefighters.

Overtime

The investigation revealed that CRR does not utilize overtime to meet its state-mandated inspection requirements. Many CRR fire inspectors work four days of ten-hour shifts in their weekly schedule.

The Grand Jury learned that Los Angeles City Fire Department’s (LAFD) Fire Prevention Bureau (FPB) has utilized a unique tactic to inspect the enormous number of multifamily residential buildings in the state’s largest city. The FPB solicits volunteers to form an overtime-only task force²⁷ which seeks to complete 100 percent of its residential occupancy inspections in the first quarter of each calendar year. In the five

most recent years of public data, the LAFD FPB achieved a 100 percent completion rate for SB 1205 residential inspections.

Calendar Year	Properties Inspected	Completion Rate
2019	53,805	100% ²⁸
2020	53,817	100% ²⁹
2021	54,495	100% ³⁰
2022	54,495	100% ³¹
2023	56,486	100% ³²

Figure 7: LAFD residential completion rate ²⁸ ²⁹ ³⁰ ³¹ ³²

San Diego is the state's second most populous city, however there are much fewer inspectable properties than in Los Angeles. SDFD could reevaluate its overtime policy and CRR could solicit volunteers to perform additional inspections on an overtime basis.

Obstacle 3: Inventory Database

In the past, SDFD has struggled to maintain an accurate database of inspectable properties. The Grand Jury learned that CRR is in the process of adopting new technology to improve data management. SDFD provided aggregate data of the number of inspectable properties for which the department has no inspection record on file.

Occupancy Type	Total Properties
Residential - Non-Transient Apartments	658
Residential - Transient Hotels, Motels	22
K-12 Schools	34
Total	714

Figure 8: SDFD properties without inspection record

CRR should prioritize inspections on these 714 missing properties, or verify their status as an inspectable property, and add them into the annual rotation.

Obstacle 4: Interdepartmental Collaboration

The Grand Jury learned that other California fire agencies work closely with their local tax and business license departments to ensure the accuracy of their inspection inventory database. In contrast, according to the investigation, SDFD does not have an overarching policy to collaborate with other City and County departments regarding SB 1205 inspectable properties. The 2010 audit recommended such a policy change to integrate data systems which SDFD did not implement. Missing data leads to lapses in fire safety inspections. The inspection inventory database would be more accurate with up-to-date tax and business information from the San Diego County Assessor and the San Diego City Treasurer.

County Fire Resources

The San Diego County Emergency Operations Plan emphasizes the need to share access to resources in the region.³³ SDFD has automatic mutual aid agreements with neighboring fire agencies for fire suppression and other emergency situations. The San Diego County Fire Prevention Officers Association (SDCFPOA) serves as a voluntary networking organization in the region. The San Diego County Fire Marshals Group was formed this year to share information and meets quarterly. In addition, the North Zone Fire Marshals Group meets every other month, and the San Diego County Fire

Protection District has monthly meetings with the Fire Marshals from the other unincorporated fire protection districts.

Annual Report and SB 1205 Compliance Data

SDFD reports its SB 1205 compliance in its adopted budget document, which is part of the City's overall budget, each July. The inspection compliance rate appears as a single line item without a breakdown for different occupancy categories. Ultimately, this data is made public after the City finalizes the budget amendments. There is a lag in budgetary and staffing response to SDFD's inspection compliance that could be remedied by reporting this data earlier in the fiscal year.

The Grand Jury reviewed publicly available reports for several fire agencies in Southern California. Locally, the Grand Jury commends the fire departments of Chula Vista,³⁴ Oceanside,³⁵ and Heartland Fire & Rescue.³⁶ (serving El Cajon, La Mesa and Lemon Grove) for their informative and visually appealing annual reports. SDFD should integrate their SB 1205 compliance data into an annual report detailing the services provided to San Diego residents and businesses.

FACTS AND FINDINGS

Fact: The 2010 City Audit made several recommendations to improve fire prevention outcomes, which San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) and Community Risk Reduction (CRR) have not fully implemented.

Fact: California Health & Safety Code Sections 13146.2, 13146.3, and 17921(b) require fire departments to conduct annual inspections of all public and private schools, hotels, motels, lodging houses, and apartments in their jurisdiction.

Fact: SB 1205 also requires fire departments to report their inspection compliance to their governing authority, such as a city council.

Fact: In July 2025, SDFD reported a 50 percent inspection completion rate for the previous fiscal year. In July 2024, SDFD reported a 68 percent completion rate.

Finding 1: Because SDFD is not completing all the state-mandated fire

inspections, there is an increased risk of loss of life and property in the event of a fire.

Fact: SDFD reports its SB 1205 compliance in its adopted budget, published each July.

Fact: The Mayor of San Diego releases the Proposed City Budget in April each year and the final budget is adopted by June 15.

Finding 2: Releasing inspection compliance at the conclusion of the budget cycle creates a delay in addressing CRR's staffing and funding needs.

Fact: Several fire departments in San Diego County publish an annual report detailing the services they provided during the previous year, e.g. inspections completed, public outreach events, and responses to emergency calls.

Fact: SDFD does not publish this type of annual report, which means most citizens are not aware of the quantity and quality of service SDFD provides, nor their inspection completion rate.

Finding 3: The lack of published, accurate, and timely data reduces public awareness and support for SDFD.

Fact: CRR does not hire non-firefighter inspectors due to Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) contract language dating back to 2009.

Fact: Non-firefighter, civilian inspectors are less costly and can be onboarded more quickly, since they would not need to graduate from the SDFD fire academy.

Fact: Sworn firefighters within Operations are short-staffed, thus there is a limited pool to select from to become CRR inspectors.

Finding 4: Civilian inspectors could be a viable, lower-cost solution to the limited inspector staffing in CRR.

Fact: SDFD typically conducts three academy classes annually. However, due to budget restrictions, only two academy classes are planned for this fiscal year.

Fact: Since SDFD manages its own fire academy, any outside firefighter who wants to join SDFD must attend its academy and complete a one-year probationary period.

Fact: It costs approximately \$60,000 to recruit and graduate a firefighter from the SDFD academy. The firefighter must complete one year of probation and obtain specific certifications before being eligible for selection to Deputy Fire Marshal in CRR.

Fact: In comparison, other fire agencies in San Diego County hire experienced “lateral transfers” if they meet certification and recent work experience criteria.

Finding 5: Due to bureaucratic obstacles and budgets limitations, annually there are not enough hired recruits to fully staff SDFD stations, let alone to transition firefighters into CRR inspector roles.

Fact: SDFD does not collaborate with other City or County departments on their inspection inventory database.

Fact: The inventory of inspectable properties increases as the City grows.

Fact: Los Angeles’s Fire Prevention Bureau collaborates with the Los Angeles County Assessor and Los Angeles City Housing & Building departments to collect data on its inspection inventory database.

Finding 6: The inspection inventory database would be more accurate with increased coordination with other City and County departments.

Fact: CRR does not regularly utilize overtime to complete state-mandated inspections.

Fact: Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) solicits volunteers for an overtime-only residential inspection taskforce. The LAFD Fire Prevention Bureau (FPB) inspected over 56,000 multifamily residential buildings in 2023, which is a 100 percent completion rate.

Fact: SDFD prefers to schedule appointments for inspections. CRR inspectors spend up to 70 percent of their work hours tracking down responsible parties and scheduling inspections or re-inspections.

Fact: LAFD typically inspects properties with no advance warning, but some property owners request a scheduled appointment.

Finding 7: Use of overtime and revised scheduling procedures would improve CRR’s inspection completion and compliance rates.

Fact: CRR inspectors must schedule their own inspections and re-inspections.

Fact: CRR inspectors often must track down property owners using public search engines or utility billing records.

Fact: There are very few administrative support staff to assist CRR inspectors.

Finding 8: It is neither efficient nor cost effective to have sworn firefighters performing logistical scheduling and billing legwork.

Fact: CRR inspected only 75 percent of schools in FY2025.

Fact: In prior fiscal years, CRR inspected as few as 40 percent of schools.

Finding 9: Uncompleted school inspections endanger students and staff in the event of an emergency.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendation 1: SDFD and City Council – Set a realistic timeline for reaching 100 percent SB 1205 inspection compliance.

Recommendation 2: SDFD – Publish an annual report detailing services provided in the prior year, to include SB 1205 compliance broken down by occupancy category. Submit the annual report to City Council with enough lead time to adjust CRR staffing and budget prior to final budget adoption.

Recommendation 3: SDFD – Identify and evaluate strategies, including considering a review of the current Memorandum of Understanding with I.A.F.F. Local 145, to create a pathway for civilian inspectors to join CRR.

Recommendation 4: SDFD – Increase the number of academy students each year to maintain staffing levels.

Recommendation 5: SDFD – Review the practice of not hiring outside applicants for a “lateral transfer”.

Recommendation 6: CRR – Integrate the County Assessor’s and City Treasurer’s data into the inspection inventory database.

Recommendation 7: CRR – Utilize voluntary overtime—and a combination of appointments and unannounced visits—to boost inspection completion rates, particularly for residential occupancies.

Recommendation 8: CRR – Hire more civilian administrative positions to assist fire inspectors with the administrative workload.

Recommendation 9: San Diego Unified School District, and other districts serving the City – Review fire safety inspection reports for their schools annually, at a minimum, by January 30, 2027.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

- Mayor of San Diego (R1, R2, R6)
- San Diego City Council (R1, R2, R6)
- San Diego County Board of Supervisors (R6)
- San Diego County Assessor (R6)

INVITED RESPONSES

- San Diego Fire-Rescue Department (R1, R2, R3, R4, R5, R6, R7, R8)
- San Diego City Treasurer (R6)
- San Diego Unified School District Board (R9)
- Poway Unified School District Board (R9)
- Chula Vista Elementary School District Board (R9)
- Del Mar Union School District Board (R9)
- San Diego County Office of Education (R9)
- San Dieguito Union High School District Board (R9)
- San Ysidro School District Board (R9)
- Solana Beach School District Board (R9)
- South Bay Union School District Board (R9)
- Sweetwater Union High School District Board (R9)

End Notes

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