

San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program

History

11/24/03

Executive Summary

The San Diego Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program (Helicopter Program) has been developed over the past five years through a myriad of meetings, written communications, and formal presentations to members of the City of San Diego Executive Team, San Diego City Council, San Diego County Board of Supervisors, State and Federal Public Officials, numerous public safety agencies, community organizations, corporations and foundations. From the onset, the need for a county-wide fire and rescue helicopter program was widely recognized and accepted, but the availability of funding was a significant challenge. Using existing staff and resources, the City spent several years developing the Helicopter Program into a viable regional service funded through innovative means.

Outlined below is a summary of the major communications concerning the development of the Helicopter Program beginning in 1998.

1998

Having recognized the need for a local fire and rescue helicopter program, staff of the Fire and Life Safety Services Department (Fire Department) started developing a conceptual operation plan for a Multi-Use Helicopter Program. This effort was undertaken by Deputy Fire Chief Mike Burner and Fire Captain Brian Fennessy of the Fire Department. Captain Fennessy had 14 years of aerial fire fighting and rescue experience with the U.S. Forest Service and developed a similar program for the Bureau of Land Management.

1999

During 1999, the development of the Helicopter Program was jump started by the unsolicited interest of a corporate sponsor in funding the program. Over the course of the year, the original sponsor withdrew its verbal offer of support, but a formal effort to secure corporate sponsors got underway. The major communications/presentations from 1999 are as follows:

■ In January, Captain Fennessy started discussing the conceptual plan for a Helicopter Program with Ron Saathoff , President of Local 145, Councilmember Byron Wear, and Metabolife International, a potential corporate sponsor. Communications on the Fire Helicopter concept were sent to Councilmember Wear on February 20 and 27 and March 19, and Ron Saathoff on March 5.

■ The concept of a corporate entity funding a fire and rescue helicopter was discussed informally between the Fire Chief and the City Manager. On March 26, the City Manager directed Fire Chief Robert Osby to submit a proposal for a three year fire and rescue helicopter program. In response to this request, the Fire Chief submitted an April 7 Memorandum (Attachment 1), proposing a Multi-Use Helicopter Program. The proposal outlined a 3-year, 12-month program or alternatively a 3-year, 7-month program to be funded in part by Metabolife. The justification for a helicopter was the enhanced service delivery to the community for the following missions:

Wildland Fire Fighting
Swiftwater/Flood/Beach Rescue
Cliff Rescue
Emergency Medical Services and Air Transportation of Patients
Heavy Rescue
High Rise Rescue
Urban Search and Rescue
Law Enforcement
Hazmat & Explosive Device Incidents
Pre-Suppression & Administrative Flights
Dignitary & VIP Flights
Special Events

■ On April 7, Chief Burner attended an Executive Board meeting of Local 145 to discuss the proposal to manage a Multi-Use Helicopter Program. In an April 19 letter to Chief Burner, Ron Saathoff wrote that the Executive Board agreed with the conceptual proposal and provided feedback on the proposed staff positions needed for the Helicopter Program.

■ On July 14 Councilmember Wear sent a Memorandum (Attachment 2) to the City Manager because of concerns over the increasing costs in the proposed Helicopter Program.

■ On July 30, Chief Osby sent a follow-up Memorandum (Attachment 3) to the City Manager explaining that initial costs of the Helicopter Program were rough estimates. Subsequent budget increases were based on a concerted review of staffing, facility and training costs necessary for the total program operation.

- In October, the City hired a new Development Director to raise money and secure new resources from the corporate community through sponsorships and partnerships. The Development Director began working with the Fire Department on the possibility of corporate sponsorship for a fire and rescue helicopter. A Request for Sponsorship proposal was developed (Attachment 4.)
- On October 29, Councilmember Wear requested a report on the status of securing sponsors for a fire helicopter for PS&NS (Attachment 5.)
- On November 4, Chief Osby sent a Memorandum (Attachment 6) to PS&NS on the status of the Helicopter Program. The report stated that Metabolife had not committed to funding the Helicopter Program, but preparations for a program were ongoing including the search for an appropriate heliport and identification of possible helicopter vendors.
- On November 10, PS&NS received a report from the Development Director regarding corporate sponsorship opportunities for a Fire Department Helicopter. At that meeting, the PS&NS committee directed the City Manager to issue a Request for Sponsorship proposal to raise money for the Helicopter Program and return to PS&NS in 90 days. The City Manager was also directed to review the potential for using Montgomery Field as a base for the helicopter operations.

2000

Throughout 2000, the City started a formal fund-raising campaign to raise money for the Helicopter Program. The campaign included the wide-spread distribution of the Request for Sponsorship Proposal and a press conference. The result of these efforts was a donation from a helicopter service provider of the use of a fire and rescue helicopter for a demonstration period of 60 days. The major communications/presentations from 2000 are as follows:

- On February 2, the City Manager submitted a report to PS&NS (Attachment 7) requesting that the committee approve the draft Request for Sponsorship and recommend that staff search the marketplace for sponsors of a Fire and Rescue Helicopter. On February 23 the committee accepted the City Manager's recommendation and directed the City Manager to proceed with developing sponsorship agreements.
- On March 13, the City Council approved City Manager Report 00-46 (Attachment 8) seeking their approval to draft a Request for Sponsorship and recommended that staff search the marketplace for sponsors of a Fire and Rescue Helicopter.
- On May 17, the Development Director sent a Memorandum to the City Manager (Attachment 9) with an update on the status of the Fire and Rescue Helicopter. The report highlighted efforts to raise money from corporate sponsorships, state and federal grants and foundation grants and gave an overview of ongoing public relations efforts.

- On June 29, Councilmember Wear hosted a press conference at South Shores Park to announce the City's new initiative to contract for a Fire and Rescue Helicopter through a public/private partnership. The Mayor and City Council along with the media and potential sponsors were formally invited by Councilmember Wear to attend.

- As a result of the ongoing fund-raising efforts, Air Resources Interagency Helicopters (Air Resources) out of Orange County agreed to donate the use of a fire and rescue helicopter for a temporary demonstration period of 30 days. The purpose of the demonstration period was to raise awareness about the need for a helicopter and train fire fighters. At the City Council meeting on November 14, Council adopted Resolution R-294157 commending Air Resources and other firms for donating their equipment to provide a demonstration period for the helicopter (Attachment 10.)

- In December, Councilmember Wear and the Weingart-Price Foundation agreed to provide \$20,000 each to fund an additional 30-day demonstration period with Air Resources in order to develop aircraft operation protocols and conduct air rescue and firefighting operations. A Memorandum of Agreement between the City and Air Resources for this 30-day demonstration was approved by the City Council on January 11 (Attachment 11.)

2001

During 2001, the City conducted a 60-day demonstration period with a fire and rescue helicopter that was donated for this purpose. This demonstration allowed the Fire Department to highlight the capabilities of the helicopter and train numerous staff. In addition, press conferences were held to promote the fund-raising program. By the end of 2001, there was significant interest in financial support for the Helicopter Program from SAFE (Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies,) but no official commitment. The major communications/ presentations from 2001 are as follows:

- On January 29, the Fire Department and Councilmember Wear hosted a demonstration of the helicopter and a press conference to announce the start of the 30-day demonstration period. All Councilmembers and the Mayor were invited to this event. Throughout the demonstration period, several politicians were invited to participate in the Helicopter Program.

- It was during this time that Supervisor Ron Roberts of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors was briefed on the nascent program. At the March 15 Board meeting of SAFE (Service Authority for Freeway Emergencies), Supervisor Roberts, a member of the SAFE Board, proposed that SAFE consider funding the Helicopter Program. The Board directed the item to the Budget Review Committee for recommendation to the Board at the May 17 meeting. The issue of funding the Helicopter Program was discussed and referred back to the Budget Review Committee because additional funding and program parameters acceptable to the Board needed to be in place (Attachment 12.)

- On August 6, Chief Osby sent a Memorandum to the Assistant City Manager reporting that the Fire Department plans to submit an application to the J.W. Sefton Foundation for grant funding for its Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program.
- On October 23, Assemblymember Christine Kehoe sent Chief Osby a letter of support for the regional fire helicopter program. A similar letter was sent on November 14 from Assemblymember Howard Wayne.

2002

In 2002, staff met with several state and federal public officials about the possibility of state or federal funding for the Helicopter Program in light of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The year was highlighted by the operation of a 90-day pilot Helicopter Program funded by Councilmember Byron Wear, the County of San Diego, and SAFE. The City issued an RFP to secure a helicopter service provider for the pilot program, which cost approximately \$470,000. The City selected Kachina Aviation out of Idaho. The major communications/presentations from 2002 are as follows:

- On February 21, City Councilman Byron Wear and Captain Brian Fennessy provided testimony before the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Military Research and Development (Attachments 13 & 14) on the need for a year-round, fully dedicated Fire and Rescue Helicopter within the San Diego Region. The focus of their testimony was on the benefits of the helicopter in terms of international border issues and homeland security.
- On May 22, Councilmember Byron Wear sent a Memorandum to Supervisor Roberts outlining a proposed 90-day Pilot Helicopter Program. His proposal outlined a commitment from his discretionary funds of \$190,000 and request for \$235,000 from SAFE and \$45,000 from the County.
- On June 18, Fire Chief Jeff Bowman sent a Memorandum to the Assistant City Manager on the implementation of the Helicopter Program (Attachment 15). This document included three alternatives for operating a Helicopter Program: 1) A 90-day Pilot Program. 2) A Regional Helicopter Joint Powers Agreement. 3) Joint Helicopter Operations with San Diego Police Department.
- On June 20, SAFE established a Technical Advisory Committee for the Helicopter Program comprised of one fire safety professional appointed by each SAFE Board member. It directed the Technical Advisory Committee to draft a set of policies and procedures for presentation to the SAFE Board under which the Helicopter Program would be operated. The board also appropriated \$230,000 for the pilot Program.

- At the July 22 City Council meeting, the Council approved the City Manager's Report 02-163 (Attachment 16) requesting the establishment of a pilot Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program contingent on receipt of funds from SAFE and the County. The Council also authorized the Manager to execute a contract with Kachina Aviation to provide a fire and rescue helicopter service.
- On October 30, the Fire Department presented City Manager's Report 02-252 to PS&NS on the status of the pilot Helicopter Program (Attachment 17). In summary, the Fire Helicopter, identified as Copter 1, went into service on August 8. During the first 45 days, Copter 1 was involved in 11 working incidents throughout San Diego County including 10 vegetation fires and 1 rescue.
- An update on the status of the pilot Helicopter Program was provided at the November 21 SAFE Board meeting (Attachment 18). During the 90-day pilot program, the helicopter responded to 45 incidents and conducted 77 total hours of training to regional helicopter crews.

2003

In 2003, despite efforts to secure permanent funding, the City succeeded in securing additional funds to operate a 120-day seasonal Helicopter Program during the fire season. Additional sponsors and donors contributed to the Helicopter Program, most notably Scripps Health and Sycuan. SAFE also increased its funding for the program and new capabilities were added to the helicopter: a rescue hoist and night sun. The City went out to RFP to select a helicopter service provider for the Helicopter Program and once again selected Kachina Aviation to provide the full-service helicopter operation. The seasonal program started on June 25 and was scheduled to end on October 22.

Due to existing wildfires in Southern California and forecasted weather conditions on October 22, the California Department of Forestry (CDF) entered into a "call when needed" emergency contract with Kachina Aviation to put Copter 1 into service under CDF's jurisdiction. The helicopter was assigned to the fires in San Bernardino County.

On October 26, the City requested Copter 1 return to San Diego and took over the contract with Kachina Aviation. On October 27, CDF released Copter 1 and it returned to San Diego to help fight the Paradise and Cedar Fires and coordinate air resources within the City of San Diego.

The major communications/presentations from 2003 are as follows:

- On January 10, Scripps Health hosted a meeting to discuss the future of the Helicopter Program. Several people were invited including City officials, SAFE Board members, the Technical Advisory Committee, and corporations. At the meeting, Scripps Health announced that it had agreed to become a sponsor of the Helicopter Program and would help raise funds for this service.

- On February 5, the Fire Department reported to PS&NS on the status of the Helicopter Program (Attachment 19.) The report highlighted the new funding sources; the efforts to develop a cooperative partnership with Sycuan Fire Department to provide the fly crew; the status of the Montgomery Field Heliport Development and the Crew Chief selection. Additionally, the report included the following information about the long-term and short-term helicopter programs.

“Due to the success of the pilot program and the need for fire and rescue helicopter services in the region, San Diego’s Fire-Rescue Department is continuing to pursue funding to establish a permanent, year-round (long-term) program and to engage in a seasonal (short-term) program.

Long-term Program: A year-round, 24/7 fully funded regional fire and rescue helicopter program would consist of the acquisition and build-up of two (2) Bell 212HP helicopters. Staffing would be accomplished by either hiring or contracting for pilots, mechanics, maintenance and support. Costs for a permanent program include a one-time expense of \$5 million to procure the aircraft and \$1 million to \$1.5 million in annual operating funds.

Short-term Program: A seasonal program would begin operations on or around July 1, 2003 (FY04) and operate for a minimum of four (4) months. The duration of the seasonal program will be dictated by the amount of funding available. The seasonal program is a “contract” program with turn-key helicopter operations provided by a vendor selected through the City Request for Proposal (RFP) process. The cost for a seasonal program is approximately \$800,000.”

- On April 3, a press conference was held at Scripps Memorial Hospital to demonstrate the use of the helicopter during a weapons of mass destruction event. Scripps also used the occasion to announce its plans to raise money for the Helicopter program and host a celebrity golf tournament.
- On April 29 and 30, Scripps Health hosted a Celebrity Invitational Golf Tournament at Torrey Pines Golf Course to raise money and awareness for the Helicopter Program. Mayor and Council and other City officials were invited by the Fire Chief to attend the event. Scripps donated \$200,000 to the Helicopter Program through the golf tournament.
- At the June 9 City Council meeting, during Chief Bowman’s presentation on the Fire-Rescue Departmental Budget, he commented in his summary of recent departmental accomplishments, that there have been on-going efforts to obtain corporate sponsorships for the Seasonal Regional Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program.

- At the June 17 City Council meeting, the Mayor and City Council approved City Manager's Report 03-121 (Attachment 20). Specifically, Council authorized the establishment of a countywide Seasonal Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program with service provided by a private vendor to be operated, managed and administered by the Fire Department. Authorization was contingent upon receipt of funds from SAFE, San Diego County and private donors and sponsors. The Council also authorized the Manager to execute a contract with Kachina Aviation. The cost of the 120-day program was estimated at \$808,000.
- On July 1, a press conference was held to kick-off the 2003 seasonal program, although the service officially started on June 25. All City officials, sponsors, donors and the media were invited to this event.
- On July 17, the SAFE Board officially authorized the payment of \$400,000 for the 2003 Seasonal Fire and Rescue Helicopter Program.
- On July 30, September 10 and September 30, Fire Chief Jeff Bowman sent letters to Mayor and Council on the status of the Seasonal Helicopter Program (Attachments 21, 22, &23.) The letters outlined the dates for upcoming training events and invited everyone to attend.
- On October 8, a motorist aid drill was held to demonstrate the value of the helicopter in mitigating the impact of roadway emergencies.
- On October 17, a press event was held to announce the end of the Seasonal Helicopter Program for 2003 and demonstrate the value of the rescue hoist.

Additional Information:

- Program Update on October 15, 2003
- Revenue and Expense – 2003 Seasonal Program
- Monthly Extension Costs
- News clippings since 1999