

Thomas Cooley Nomination
Mike Gotch Excellence in Public Service Award

Thomas Cooley, in his lifetime, was the embodiment of dedication to public service and excellence in all aspects of his public, professional, and personal life. Tom gave all of himself to everything he did, educating himself on all facets of the project at hand, problem solving any challenges in the process, and maintaining determination to completion. His final project, on which he worked up until just days before his passing, was no exception.

Tom served 7 years as a city council representative to Plumas LAFCo, and during that time he represented the city position in the Northern Region on the CALAFCO Board and served 2 years as Chair and 2 years as Vice Chair.

Within his second year on LAFCo his City's Fire Department was forced to close its doors. From the closure, while many were focused on efforts to merely reopen, Tom took the opportunity to develop a vision of enhanced regional fire and emergency medical services, not only in his City but the surrounding communities. As was typical of Tom, he researched every angle of the various possibilities and sought input from knowledgeable sources inside and outside the area.

Similar to many other counties, Eastern Plumas County is served by a number of small fire protection agencies, with interspersed communities that are currently outside of any local jurisdiction responsible for providing fire services. Tom recognized that all fire and emergency agencies in the region, as well as other rural areas, were confronting similar challenges in providing adequate and sustainable services and could best address these issues as a united front. He sought support from the several other fire and emergency medical providers in the region in developing his vision.

In January 2020, the Local Emergency Services Study Group (LESSG) was created through a Memorandum of Understanding, to explore ways to strengthen and improve the provision of fire and emergency services throughout the region. The LESSG is comprised of representatives from each participating agency—Tom represented the City and acted as Chair. After collecting information on the status of the existing districts and robust discussion with stakeholders, the LESSG recommended that the best course of action was to form a new fire protection district that would combine services in the region. LESSG hired a consultant to conduct a feasibility study and compile a Plan for Services to assess whether formation and reorganization is sustainable and define how services will be provided and funded upon formation of the proposed district. In October 2022, the participating fire agencies each unanimously approved the feasibility study and directed the LESSG to compile an application to Plumas LAFCo for the reorganization. Each of the agencies adopted substantially similar Resolutions of Application for the formation of a new fire protection district and reorganization of the fire and emergency medical services offered by the four applicants. An application was filed with Plumas LAFCo and ultimately approved. An election has been called on the November 2023 ballot to approve the proposed district formation and associated special tax.

The proposed formation will officially merge the operations of four different agencies currently providing fire services into one efficient, effective, and sustainable emergency services system. This will provide a proactive, sustainable solution for future fire and emergency service needs for the area by creating a regional district with an improved economy of scale and associated benefits, including:

- a. Better utilization of resources.

- b. Enhanced capital asset planning and streamlined improvement process.
- c. Enhanced response to emergency incidents based on key operational activities performed by paid professionals, paid part-time readiness staff, expanded paid personnel, fleet and station readiness, and district-wide uniform training and procedures.
- d. Reduced operating and administrative costs while increasing service levels.
- e. Enhanced efficiency of management through combining of technology infrastructure, fleet maintenance, and other administrative functions.
- f. Enhanced and standardized public education outreach.

Tom was essential to the success of every detail of this process, including 1) garnering support from local agencies, 2) spearheading meetings and gaining early commitments of support from other critical agencies, such as the County, 3) designing the MOU tool for collaboration, 4) leading/guiding the efforts of the study group during and between meetings, 5) presenting to each of the member agency boards at significant decision making points, 6) supporting the feasibility study consultants with detailed hands on analysis of the proposed special tax, 7) requesting LAFCO support of the process in the form of staff time and partial financing of the application process, 8) leading the effort to gather updated information from affected agencies for the MSR and SOI Update, 9) detailed review and contributions to every component of the application to LAFCO, and 10) most importantly maintaining the momentum of the group even in the face of speed bumps and slowed pace due to outside factors.

Tom was vocal about the success of the group, and if you met him at a conference, he likely walked you through the whole project. He proudly presented on the efforts as a panelist for the CALAFCO U session entitled *Fire & EMS Service Basics, Challenges and LAFCo's Role & Responsibility Session 4: So, you've done a great Municipal Service Review, now what? A look at rural, suburban and urban case studies.*

While the initiative has yet to be finalized at the upcoming election, the process has already been a success story no matter the outcome at the polls. Tom garnered stakeholder support in an area that typically has not been receptive to change. He, in cooperation with input from others, developed an innovative process to 1) promote ease of discussion and allow for consideration of creative solutions, 2) ensure a method to confirm stakeholder agency buy in at each step of the process, 3) best leverage the available resources from each member agency, 4) keep the agencies and public informed of any outcomes from regular study group meetings, and 5) prioritize information gathering and the making of well-informed decisions. Once finalized the formation of the new fire district will greatly enhance fire services in the region. This process can be used as a template for other agencies considering reorganizations of similar size and scope beyond Plumas County and fire and emergency services. Those that knew him and his dedication to this project continue to carry the torch in his honor to see his vision realized. Attendees at his memorial service were spreading the word to say "Yes" on Measures E and F.