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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

## Media heat prompts East Bay fire-response deal -- for now

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It took a deadly fire -- but this week, after a four-year stalemate, the city of Richmond and Contra Costa County have revived an agreement that calls for the nearest fire crews to respond to an emergency, regardless of city boundaries.

"It feels like a weight has been lifted off our shoulders," Richmond Fire Chief Michael Banks said.

And well it should.

Within a half-hour of the pact being activated, it was being put to the test. At 7:30 a.m. Tuesday, Richmond Engine Co. 62, at Seventh and Hensley streets, was dispatched across city lines to San Pablo for a medical emergency.

As we first reported a month ago, firefighters questioned whether the deaths of three children -- ages 9, 4 and 2 -- from smoke inhalation in a Richmond townhouse fire could have been averted had the aid agreement been in place.

The first Richmond fire crew reached the blaze in the Hilltop neighborhood in a couple of minutes, but backup crews -- several miles away on Richmond's Valley View Road -- didn't arrive until 5 1/2 minutes after they were called.

There was a county station just a mile from the fire, and county fire officials say firefighters would have arrived in just three minutes if called -- a potentially critical 2 1/2 minutes quicker than some of the Richmond crews.

But Richmond had dropped its automatic-aid agreement with the county in 2002. There were problems with radio communication, and Richmond's already-stretched crews were being asked to respond to the county's calls 700 times more often each year than the county was responding to theirs.

The city and county couldn't work out their differences -- that is, until last month's tragic deaths prompted county and Richmond officials to hammer out a new deal ... pronto.

As always, there's a catch: The deal will be off in a year unless money and a laundry list of bureaucratic issues are worked out.

So while Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia said he was happy about the new agreement, he quickly warned: "I don't want to be back in a year from now in the same place scrambling to reinstate it."

Whether it would have made a difference in last month's deadly fire, he said, "I don't want to have to be faced with any 'ifs' in the future."